



HELLISHLY EVER AFTER

INFERNAL COVENANT  BOOK ONE

NADINE MUTAS

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CONTENTS

[Cover Copy](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Also by Nadine Mutas](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

HELLISHLY EVER AFTER

by Nadine Mutas

Ever held a seance and accidentally trapped a demon into marriage? No takers? Just me? Crap.

Marriage is my idea of hell, at least until the day an unfairly hot demon shows up in my apartment and drags me to actual Hell—as his wife.

I'd honestly rather have a root canal without sedation than marry anyone, least of all a surly—even if damnably attractive—demon. But I'm bound to the contract stupid Teenage Me made with Azazel when I accidentally summoned and trapped him into marriage, to be consummated if I were still single at twenty-five.

I'd forgotten all about it.

He hasn't.

And now he's here to claim me.

Neither of us is thrilled about this marriage-of-inconvenience, but what I hate even more than the idea of being married...is being ignored. So when Azazel intends to park me out of sight and mind at the other end of his estate in Hell, I make it my newly eternal life's mission to be as much of a real inconvenience to him as possible.

It's all fun and games, until I find a soul that shouldn't be in Hell, stumble smack-dab into the middle of a demon family feud...and the banter between me and Azazel turns so hot it might consume me.

*To my father, who left us too soon.
I miss you, Papa.*

CHAPTER 1

MARRIAGE IS HELL—OR SO I THOUGHT UNTIL THE NIGHT A DEMON POPPED INTO MY LIVING ROOM AND dragged me to *actual* Hell.

That's already pretty freak-out worthy in anyone's book, but to make matters worse—insert the voice of the man from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* who's about to be stoned to death asking, "Making it worse? How could it be worse?"—that brooding jerk of a demon forced me to *marry* him.

The nerve.

So, yeah, marriage in Hell. Double whammy for me.

And to think, I was bummed about celebrating my twenty-fifth birthday all by my lonesome. Ha.

If I'd known who—what—was going to show up later, I'd have lit some sage instead of a sad little candle on a cupcake.

Blissfully unaware of my impending doom, I stared into the flame of the tiny cupcake candle for a moment, focusing on my wish for the year ahead.

Health? That's always a good thing to have. I was good on that front, but wishing for it to stay that way sure wasn't a bad idea.

Success? Given that I'd just landed a good job at one of San Francisco's most reputable accounting firms, I was doing great here too, but of course that was just the first step up a high-reaching ladder. Keeping what I'd worked so hard for and making sure I'd continue on that path was definitely at the top of my wish list.

Love? Eh...

I grimaced. Love and I weren't on speaking terms. After a few spectacularly failed relationships, I'd decided to avoid further romantic entanglements for the foreseeable future. They were always so very...tangly. I shuddered.

The flame danced in front of my eyes, topping the "25" candle stuck into the frosting on the red velvet cupcake I'd grabbed at Target on the way home from work.

I swallowed past the pinch in my heart. This would be the first birthday I'd have to ring in alone, without at least one good friend to share my (cup)cake with. Sure, I'd talked on the phone with my BFF and my mom earlier in the day, and I received text messages and posts on my social media from more friends. It just wasn't the same as actually hanging out and celebrating with someone I loved. I hadn't realized until now how much it mattered to me.

If I'd been at this job a little longer already, I would have invited my new colleagues... As it was, I'd only just started two days ago, and I was still desperately trying to memorize everybody's names. The only person at work who'd known it was my birthday today was my new boss. His casually dropped "By the way, Zoe—happy birthday!" almost made me drop my coffee when he popped his

head inside my cubicle. I'd stammered back a cringe-worthy "You too!" and watched him retreat with an expression somewhere between confusion and concern, probably reassessing his decision to hire me.

Socially awkward, I could do. Just like replaying mortifying episodes in my head until I wanted to bang said body part against the nearest hard surface. Thank God I was better at accounting than at social interactions.

I took a deep breath. Okay then, I'd just make this part of my birthday wish.

Make new friends, don't scare them off with my weirdness, keep my job and be great at it, stay healthy.

And definitely, most certainly, not fall in love.

Closing my eyes, I blew out the candle.

"Happy birthday to meeeeeee," I whispered, trying not to sound pathetic and failing pathetically.

After I extinguished the smoke by squeezing the wick between thumb and index finger, I plucked the candle from the cupcake.

"The next one will be better," I muttered, picking up the red velvet dessert. "I'll have colleagues and friends over and throw a huge party here."

"Yeah, about that..." a deep male voice behind me said.

I whirled around, dropped the cupcake and shrieked.

The last time I'd screamed that loud, I'd opened the shower curtain in my college dorm bathroom to find a ginormous spider right in my face. That was also the one and only time in my life I'd miraculously transformed into a kung-fu master. Alas, those martial arts moves never came to my rescue again.

They certainly deserted me now, when I faced an unknown male intruder in my home.

A tall, dark, and lethally graceful intruder. He lounged against the wall, half wrapped in shadow despite the overhead lights fully turned on. His black clothes—which looked disturbingly like fighting gear—did nothing to hide the intimidating amount of muscles on him, from the broad shoulders, to the strong biceps stretching his rolled-up sleeves, to the powerful thighs.

My eyes snapped back up, focused on that piercing gaze set in a face I'd have described as achingly, sensually beautiful if I'd seen him under different circumstances. You know, as a model in an ad for the latest extravagant Italian luxury line, perhaps, or as the new Hollywood heartthrob.

As opposed to the psycho who'd just broken into my apartment.

Never mind the fact he looked like a fallen angel with whom any hot-blooded woman—and many a man—would want to explore the very meaning of sin. His standing here in my living room, uninvited, unannounced, a stranger with an unknown and likely menacing agenda, pushed him straight into creep territory.

I stumbled back a step, putting more space between us. My heart pounded so loud, my ears were ringing. Sensible questions to ask when confronting a home intruder might be "Who are you?" or "What are you doing here?"

My brain couldn't decide between the two, so—naturally—what I ended up blurting out was, "Who are you doing here?"

Hi, I'm Zoe, and I'm verbally challenged.

While fires of embarrassment ate up my insides and probably painted my face an unsightly shade of red, Gorgeous Creep's mouth twitched with the ghost of a smile.

"It's time, Zoe."

I froze. *He knows my name.* Well, duh. Any guy sociopathic enough to calmly break and sneak

into a woman's home would have done his research, right?

He pushed off the wall, and I could have sworn shadows whispered behind him in the shape of wings.

I was losing it. Clearly. This whole situation must have fried something in my brain.

"Let's get this over with." He waved a hand in the air, his voice a little too bored for a psycho preparing to act out his twisted fantasy.

We all like to believe we'd be brave in the face of danger, or at least...dignified and *trying*. So did I. Like most women, I'd mentally worked through various scenarios of being assaulted by a man, and how to best get out of it. Or to avoid it in the first place. I'd thought I had a good handle on what I'd do, a strategy, *something*.

In reality, as this huge guy approached me, what I did was *squeak*.

Like a fucking mouse stalked by a tiger.

Scrambling back until I hit the table, I managed to snap, "Stay away from me!" I reached out blindly behind me, my fingers touching my phone. *Thank God*. I grabbed it, my hand shaking, and unlocked it via Touch ID without taking my eyes off him. "Get out of here or I'm calling 911."

He chuckled. "And what good would that do?"

"Umm, they'll send an officer over to arrest you?" *If the intruder is still here by that time, that is...* My pulse thundered in my head, my breathing way too fast. It occurred to me that in the minutes it would take a cop to get here, this creep could do any number of things to me. Help from law enforcement would do me a fat lot of good if I were dead on the floor.

He narrowed his eyes, which were an unfairly brilliant shade of blue-gray, far too stunning for an asshole like him. "Who do you think I am?"

Was that a trick question?

My confusion must have shown on my face, because before I could venture a guess, his features hardened, making him impossibly more menacing. "You don't remember."

"Remember what?"

Darkness pulsed around him. Or maybe the lights flickered. It couldn't have been real black smoke that misted about his form for a heartbeat, because that would have made me batshit insane.

And I refused to believe that.

I didn't, however, imagine the growl coming from him, raising the hairs on my arms and neck.

"Twelve years ago," he said through gritted teeth, his expression finally matching that of a psycho intent on inflicting pain, "you trapped me in a deal."

My brain short-circuited. I choked on my next breath. *No*. Stomach dropping, I spaced out for a moment as slivers of a memory flashed up, the pieces too scattered to form a picture, yet strong enough in their implication to cause an ominous shiver to skitter down my spine.

"You summoned me," he continued, advancing on me again while more darkness pooled around him, "and you tricked me into a contract." A muscle feathered in his jaw. He looked murderous. "I am here to fulfill that contract."

A memory wanted to shake itself loose, but my consciousness fought it hard, reason and logic trying desperately to prevail. This couldn't be happening. It was impossible. He couldn't be—

"Azazel," I whispered, voicing the name that surfaced from the depths of my mind.

His eyes flashed as he snarled, like lightning through clouds of storm gray. "Starting to remember?" He took another sinuous step toward me. The air crackled around him. "After you conveniently *forgot* me?"

"I was thirteen," I finally got out, the pieces having connected to revive a chilling memory. "It

was supposed to be a joke...”

“A joke?” He appeared to choke on the word.

My throat dried up. “Well—umm—” I stammered, my voice embarrassingly creeping up to a whispered squeak. “You know, two teenagers having a fake séance kind of thing, making a ‘deal with the devil’ to not end up sad and alone...” I made air-quotes for him.

He did not look impressed.

“You called on me,” he growled, “as a *joke*?”

“I didn’t think you were real!”

Darkness exploded from him.

There’s no other way to describe it—shadows shot out from his form as if his very core were made of pitiless black that devoured all light. It snuffed out the lamps in the room, plunging everything into unrelenting darkness. Not even the streetlights penetrated the stygian veil that suffocated me.

As fast as he’d thrown the shadows out, he pulled them back into himself—only now two enormous black wings rose behind him. A faint shimmer of fire danced upon the glossy onyx of their feathers.

“Is this real enough for you?” he snapped.

“Shouldn’t your wings be leathery?” I covered my mouth with both hands, but it was too late. My verbal filter had successfully failed again.

He curled his lip. “We’re not bats.”

“But the pictures—”

“Are wrong. Monks and prophets and saints.” He scoffed. “There is little they got right. Now.” He stretched his wings, knocking a glass off the coffee table. Those things sure were solid. “Pack your things and come.”

“What the—what?”

“It’s time.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “We need to be gone by midnight, but I’d rather not spend the next two hours watching you pack. So grab your essentials and let’s go.” He paused, tilting his head as he studied me. “I’m letting you pack your stuff as a courtesy. Don’t make me regret my indulgence.”

I stood there, giving him the most pathetic imitation of a fish out of water while my brain desperately tried to keep up.

“What are you talking about?” I finally managed.

He stared at me. The carpet beneath him started smoldering. “Do you need this spelled out?” His voice was deceptively calm. “Maybe in a slide show presentation?” Fine tendrils of smoke rose up from his boots. “Or drawn with crayons?”

His sarcasm raised my hackles, but for once my sense of self-preservation kicked in and made me bite back my scathing response.

Instead I carefully asked, “Why should I need to pack my things?”

“Because,” he replied in a measured tone generally used on morons, “you’re coming to Hell with me.”

My heart skipped a beat. The smoke detector chose that moment to go off, and I jumped and clutched my chest. I’d have a cardiac arrest before this night was over.

The demon’s gaze cut to the beeping menace on the ceiling, and the next second the smoke detector exploded.

I shrieked and ducked under the table.

Yep, cardiac arrest coming right up.

“So,” the demon said into the oppressive silence, “you forgot me *and* the terms of the contract you tricked me into.”

From my vantage point under the table, I could only see his legs and boots...and the burn marks on the carpet where he stood. I swallowed. “I didn’t trick you into anything. I didn’t even know what I was doing!”

The lights flickered. A pulse of...something shuddered through the room, raising goosebumps on my skin.

“I’ll refresh your memory.” His voice was velvety soft with the kind of rumbling undertone that would usually make my knees weak. Good thing I was already kneeling on the floor. Going spaghetti-legged right in front of this guy would be worse than hiding under a table.

“The covenant you forced me into stipulates that should you be unwed by your twenty-fifth birthday, I am to...” He made a pause, and when he spoke again, he sounded as if he were chewing on a lemon “...marry you.”

His words echoed in my mind, merging with the revived memory of one stupid night twelve years ago. And I knew them to be true, with nauseating certainty.

I cowered back, further under the table, and wrapped my arms around my drawn-up legs. Reality was slipping away from me, one shallow, too-fast breath at a time.

“I’m getting tired of talking to a table top.” His feathers rustled. The air filled with pressure. “Come out from under there or I’ll drag you out.” The pressure increased. “You won’t like that,” he added in a low voice.

His energy, I realized. The thing suffusing the air and raising the tiny hairs on my nape was his power.

I looked around me, panic beating under my skin. A way out. There had to be a way out. But the space under the table offered no escape route. Two sides were open to the room, where the nutcase demon loomed. The other two sides backed up against the wall and the fridge. I was trapped in the tiny kitchen of my newly rented, “efficiency-sized” one-bedroom apartment.

“Can we, like, talk about this?” I ventured, my stomach in knots. “I mean, I know I somehow summoned you and we ended up with this farce of a deal, but—I was a teenager! A minor. I couldn’t even legally buy a car, let alone enter any other contract. Shouldn’t that apply to your kind of deals too? Given that I was a child, this pact should be—”

An invisible force grabbed hold of me and pulled me out from under the table so abruptly that I didn’t even manage to scream. I slid over the carpet as if dragged by a rope, coming to a halt right next to the demon. My head was level with his boots.

“—null and void,” I finished numbly, my gaze traveling up his long legs, over his lean hips, all the way up to that face of angelic masculine beauty.

He really shouldn’t be that stunning as a demon. Or maybe he should? I wasn’t so naive to believe that external beauty equalled inherent goodness, or the opposite. And in a way, it made perfect sense that tempters of humankind would dazzle with aesthetics.

“Age of majority for contracts is a human concept,” the unfairly attractive hell spirit in question said, his expression that of someone inspecting dog shit on their shoes. “The covenant between us is legal and binding.”

I decided I’d had enough of being prostrate on the floor at his feet, and scrambled to a stand, putting a few steps between us. There was no way I could face him at eye level—he towered over me at easily six foot five, and the unceasing pressure of his energy in the air was a constant reminder that he outmatched my puny human strength with whatever demon powers he had. But I wasn’t going to

crawl before him.

"I don't want to marry you," I blurted out.

"Likewise." He bared his teeth at me.

"Well—" I sputtered and waved my hands in the air. "Then why are you even here? I don't want to do this, you don't want to do this, so let's just not do this!"

"That's not how it works."

"Okay, is there a magic word or phrase I need to say?" I reached out with my hand and intoned in my best Gandalf impression, "I release you from this spell."

The demon stared at me.

Not a *Lord of the Rings* fan, then.

"The covenant cannot be revoked. Both parties must fulfill its terms, or suffer the consequences."

"What? What kind of ridiculous contract is this if I can't even cancel it?"

"You tell me," he shot back, fire licking over the obsidian of his wings. "You're the one who drafted it."

"I didn't draft it, I just read from an old book in a mock séance for shits and giggles with my best friend. I didn't even understand half of it! It was a whole lot of mumbo jumbo that sounded cool and occult and seemed like a fun thing to do on a Friday night."

His left eye twitched.

"Maybe there's—"

"I don't," he interrupted with a snarl, "have all night. You will get what you need and follow me to Hell."

He moved closer, and I held up one hand.

"Wait. Just...hold on for a second. Why do I need to come with you? I mean, if this...covenant says we must marry, we could just, like, live separately? I'll be here on Earth, you'll be in Hell, we'll be married in name only, and everyone will be happy!"

His eyes widened, and he pressed a hand to his cheek. "That would be brilliant!"

"Right?" I couldn't help the smile stealing onto my face. "I knew there must be a way ar—"

"If the covenant didn't explicitly say we had to *live together*," he cut me off, losing the pretense of surprised excitement with every word he spoke. By the end of the sentence, he regarded me with the same sour expression as before, and I had the sinking feeling he sported that look for me specifically, rather than being a grouch in general.

I clenched my teeth, fighting the heat of embarrassment rolling through me. *Sardonic ass.*

"So just live here on Earth, then," I snapped. "I'm sure it beats whatever shithole in Hell you call home."

I regretted those words as soon as they'd left my mouth. My sense of self-preservation, it seemed, operated with a delay of a few seconds. Unfortunately, that's all my temper needed to get the better of me.

The light dimmed, sucked away as if devoured by ravenous shadows, until the only things illuminating the darkness were the glowing storm gray of his eyes and the flames whispering over his wings.

"Careful," he murmured. "You're speaking of your future home."

Relief flooded me when he let the light crawl back into the room. I swallowed hard.

"My point," I said, taking care to keep my tone polite, "was that it seems the better option for you to live on Earth."

"No." His eyes glittered hard.

I stared at him.

He stared back.

Taking a deep breath, I reined in my rising anger. “Why. Not.”

“I’m bound to Hell.”

I blinked. “You’re here now.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “There are limits to how long I can stay.”

“Oh.” My shoulders sagged. If he truly wasn’t *able* to live on Earth, and the contract specified we had to live together...I would really have to go to Hell with him.

My heart leapt into my throat, its beat too fast. The room seemed to close in on me, and this time I was sure it wasn’t the demon’s doing.

I couldn’t let him take me. There had to be a way out, a loophole, *something*. I wasn’t just going to up and leave my life here for a likely torturous existence in a dimension of nightmares.

I had been inching away from him, and now the backs of my knees bumped into the couch. I almost lost my balance, but caught myself with one hand on a cushion. My gaze fell on my purse, which I had thrown here earlier—and on the mace sticking out of it.

On an impulse, I grabbed the spray, aimed it at the demon and pressed the trigger. A surprisingly long stream of misty liquid shot out. It would have hit him somewhere on his torso...if the agile bastard hadn’t sidestepped the spray with supernatural grace.

The shot hit the wall, leaving a faint stain as if someone had taken a water pistol to the wallpaper.

“Pepper spray?” the demon asked. “Really?”

My eyes flicked to him, and I flinched. He looked outwardly calm, bored even, but there was something writhing underneath his nonchalance, like he was one wrapping-that-doesn’t-open-where-it-should away from snapping like a workaholic who’d run out of coffee.

I wondered what kind of day he’d had, whether he’d run into problem after problem only to be now faced with having to wrangle an unsuspecting, unprepared and altogether uncooperative human woman into marriage and a trip back to Hell. I was probably the cherry on top of his shit sundae, and here I was, trying to attack him with pepper spray. I admit it. Of all the moronic things I’d done, this ranked pretty damn high.

Right under summoning a demon in a joke séance, of course.

I smiled apologetically. Or rather, I tried to. My smile ended in a grimace as I started coughing and wheezing. My eyes watered, and I gasped at the burning sensation. “Stop,” I croaked. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s not me,” the demon said, exasperation in his voice. I couldn’t see it through the tears blurring my vision, but I had the distinct impression he was rolling his eyes. “It’s what happens when someone is idiotic enough to use pepper spray indoors.”

With a flick of his wrists, the windows slid open. A merciful breeze blew inside, and I took a deep breath. *Thank heavens.*

In my defense, I’d never tested the pepper spray before. How could I have known one pump of it released a stream big enough to paint the wall in Jackson Pollock style?

My eyes were still stinging, my lungs felt like I’d dipped them in acid, but I mastered what I hoped was a propitiatory smile and said, “My apologies for that. Just a case of nerves. It’s all a bit much, you know? I’m sorry for overreacting.” I swallowed, pushing down my anxiety. “I’ll be ready in a few minutes. I just need to grab a couple things. As you so graciously offered.”

I grimaced inwardly. *Lay it on thick, why don’t you, Zoe?*

The demon stared at me, his stormy gaze inscrutable. He stood much closer to where the pepper

spray had hit the wall, yet he seemed entirely unaffected by it. His eyes were clear, and he wasn't coughing up a storm. A chill coursed down my spine. Just another reminder of how *not* human this guy was.

"You have five minutes." His dark voice caressed my senses, and I suppressed another shiver.

I snatched my purse from the couch and speed-walked into my bedroom.

"A little privacy," I called out as I closed the door.

Heart thundering in my chest, I hurried into the ensuite bathroom and turned on the faucet in the sink. While I was there, I quickly splashed my face with water, hoping to get some of the pepper spray out of my eyes and nose. I kept the water running, unlocked my phone and dialed my BFF's number from the favorites. *Please pick up*, I silently prayed. *Please pick up*.

I checked the time and did some math while it rang. It had to be close to four in the afternoon over there. Not the best time to call on a workday—she was likely still at the office—but better than if she'd still be living here in the States. She'd often go to bed early, and chances wouldn't be good that she'd pick up if I called her this late at night.

However, she'd moved to Australia a few months ago. Which sucked big time. Having my best friend since childhood move to the other side of the world was a constant source of pain. We hadn't always lived in the same place after we finished school, but we were never farther apart than a few short hours by car. We often visited each other on weekends.

That wasn't possible anymore. Still, thanks to technology, we could bridge the distance with frequent chats via text and video calls.

And the one good thing to come from her moving so far away was that I could now call her late at night with a demonic emergency, and she'd actually be awake to pick up.

"Hey there," Taylor answered my call, "what's up? Isn't it a bit late over there? Are you—"

"Tay," I interrupted her, "do you remember that séance we did when we were thirteen?"

"Umm. A bit random, but okay."

"*Do you remember?*" I whisper-shouted into the phone.

"Sheesh. Yes, I do. Kind of hard to forget. The lights flickered, and it scared the shit out of me. Why are you bringing it up now?"

"He's here. The demon I summoned that night. He's here because apparently I trapped him into a contract back then, and the time for it is up, and now he's here to drag me to Hell with him."

Silence.

"Tay?" I squinted with my still tearing eyes at the display to check whether we'd been disconnected. *All good*. "Did you hear me?"

Taylor cleared her throat. "I heard you all right. It's just... Have you been drinking? I mean, I know it's your birthday, but—"

"I'm not drunk."

"Had a smoke?"

"I'm not high either!"

"Okay... You must realize how this sounds."

"Tay, I swear on our shared hatred of the *How I Met Your Mother* ending, I am not making this up. This is real. There is a demon standing in the next room claiming I trapped him into some crazy marriage contract, and right now I'm supposed to pack my bags and follow him to Hell."

A pregnant pause.

"Are you serious?" Taylor whispered.

"I am. I wish I weren't. I wish this were a terrible joke, but it is the fucking truth, and I'm

terrified. I'm scared shitless, and I need you, Tay. I need my best friend."

"Fuck, Zoe." She took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, audibly pulling herself together. "Okay. Here's the plan—you need a priest."

"A priest."

"Uh, yeah, obviously. A Catholic one, ideally. You need to get out of there somehow and find a church. Get in, grab a priest, and ask him for an exorcism or something. Maybe you can bathe in Holy Water?"

I let out a dry laugh, careful to keep it quiet. I wasn't sure if the demon could hear us over the sound of the water running.

"Tay," I said, rubbing one hand over my face, "where am I supposed to find a church that's open this late? This isn't the fifties, when churches would be open 24/7. They all close early these days and lock their doors because people are shitty and steal from churches."

"Not all of them are closed." I heard the distinct clacking of a keyboard in the background. "Here. There's one just a few blocks from you, and they're having a late candle light vigil or something. They started at nine, but if you hurry, you might just catch the priest on his way out."

"Tay, you're an angel. Thank you."

"Well, you do need divine assistance against your demonic betrothed."

My low laugh felt brittle. "Can you stay on the line?"

"Of course."

I slung my purse around my shoulder, slipped into an extra pair of flats and carefully slid the window open.

"I tried to attack him with pepper spray," I whispered as I maneuvered over the windowsill to the fire escape landing on the other side.

"You didn't!"

I grimaced. "I was panicking. But it didn't even affect him at all."

"Oooh! Do you still have it on you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Maybe you can get the priest to bless the spray. I bet it will affect him then."

"Holy Pepper Spray," I mused. "The idea has some merit."

I was at the end of the fire escape, the street looming at what looked like nine feet below me.

"Hold on," I said to Taylor. "I need to find the drop ladder."

I'd never had to use a fire escape before, but I knew there had to be a ladder that would slide out and bridge the drop to the ground. I looked around, my heart still beating a frantic rhythm. If my escape took too long, the demon would come after me and find me scrambling down this ladder.

There, fastened to the side of the building, almost invisible in the dark, sat a narrow metal ladder, long enough to reach the ground.

I fumbled for a moment, then found the lever for releasing the ladder. It slid down along the hinges attached to the wall with a frighteningly loud screech.

"Was that the demon?" Taylor asked.

"No," I grumbled, throwing an anxious glance upward to my bedroom window. "That was a drop ladder in desperate need of lubrication."

"That's what he said."

My snort was totally unladylike. "I'm gonna pack you away while I climb down, okay?"

"Sure."

Hands clammy, I descended the ladder and let myself fall the short rest of the way to the street.

With the drop ladder, it was only a few feet instead of the previous ankle-breaking height.

“All right,” I said as I put my phone back to my ear, “which way, all-knowing one?”

“Left for two blocks, then turn right.”

Without missing a beat, I ran. My trip down the fire escape had taken longer than I was comfortable with, and I had to make sure I was well on my way when the demon noticed I was gone. I didn’t know whether the demon could track me, so the farther away I got before he figured out I had vanished, the better.

Come to think of it, though—he’d found me after twelve years, in a new apartment, a new city. The chance of him not being able to track me were slim, to be honest. My heart pumped overtime, my lungs burned, and not just from the pepper spray. I was running faster than I had in a long time, and my body screamed in protest.

“I should have...exercised...more...” I spat out in between gasping for air.

“Well,” Tay said, “it’s not like you knew you’d one day need a whole lot of sprinting prowess to run from a demon.”

I would if I hadn’t forgotten about the whole deal. *Ugh*. “I see...the church...”

“Great. Okay, it says here that this vigil or whatever is in the church itself, but you may have to check one of the side entrances if the main door is locked.”

“Thanks,” I wheezed.

Running up the steps to the portal, I forced my legs to keep working for these last few feet. After stumbling to a stop in front of the door, I grabbed the big handle and pulled. It didn’t give.

“It’s locked,” I panted into the phone.

“Google Maps shows a side entrance around the corner. Try that one.”

“Okay.” And off I ran, again.

Down the steps, around the corner. Just...a bit...farther. *There*.

“I see...the priest... He’s locking...the door...”

“Oh, thank fuck. Go get exorcised, girl. Call me when you can, okay?”

“Of course.” I hung up just as I skidded to a stop next to the priest.

The man startled, his eyes going wide. He had salt-and-pepper hair and wore a simple black outfit with the typical white collar.

I hadn’t been raised Catholic, so I had no personal experience with clergy, and no emotional association either way, but boy, was I thrilled to see a priest now.

“I...need...help,” I wheezed out and doubled over, my hands on my knees.

“Are you hurt?” The priest stretched out a hand, clearly unsure what to do with me.

I was fairly certain I’d pulled a few muscles and maybe gone into tachycardia, but I waved his question away.

“I’m in...a bit of a...pickle,” I began, working hard to speak in full sentences again without huffing. “There’s a demon on my tail, and I need...like...an exorcism to get rid of him.”

The priest blinked. “You—you think you’re being followed by a...demon?”

“Well, yes. See, when I was thirteen, I held this...séance summoning thingy with a friend—I know, I know, those things shouldn’t be dabbled in, believe me, I’ve learned my lesson—and apparently I kind of accidentally trapped a demon into a contract to marry me if I’m still single at twenty-five. Which is, unfortunately, today. And get this—that demon totally took me seriously! A teenager! I mean, who *does* that?”

I huff-laughed and remembered too late that I probably appeared like someone in need of soothing medication.

Which I wouldn't say no to, right at this moment.

The priest's expression matched my suspicion.

"Anyway," I hurried on, "I'd forgotten all about it until he popped into my living room tonight, being all broody and irritatingly hot. And I mean that literally—he singed my carpet. I barely got out of there, and now I'm in need of some priestly assistance so he won't drag me to hell with him. Can you maybe bless my pepper spray? Or give me a cross to wear as a talisman? A rosary? Anything to make sure I don't have to marry a demon who can't take a joke. Um, Father?"

The priest's face had lost all color, his features reminiscent of people caught on camera while going through a haunted house at a carnival. His wide eyes were fixed at a spot over my shoulder.

That's when I felt the heat at my back.

"He's standing right behind me, isn't he?" I whispered.

CHAPTER 2

THE PRIEST MADE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS AND MUTTERED A PRAYER WHILE I TURNED ON MY HEELS IN slow motion, grimacing.

“How did you—” I broke off when I saw him.

Yowza.

No wonder the priest looked ready to douse himself in Holy water.

The demons’s wings were on full display, blacker than midnight but glowing with an inner fire, flames licking over the feathers. As if that wasn’t enough of a statement, though, shadows writhed around the demon’s form, like a dark visualization of his energy. His eyes glowed in the mix of infernal firelight and late-night gloom.

He looked like something straight out of a paranormal thriller. I shivered despite the heat emanating from him, my heart thundering. He hadn’t been this scary in my apartment. It was like he’d amped up his natural presence by a thousand degrees. Or maybe this was his usual appearance, and he’d actually muted it before?

Either way, this was an impressive display of power.

I swallowed. “Are you deliberately scaring the priest?”

A ghost of a smile flashed across his face, before he refocused on glaring at me with the full force of his demonic grouchiness. Someone sure was pissed. Probably had something to do with having to chase a recalcitrant bride-to-be across town...

I cringed a little. “How did you find me?”

“I followed the scent of pepper spray and desperation.”

He was so annoyingly good at deadpanning. Circumstances being different, I’d have appreciated his brand of humor.

“So you thought,” he said, “running to a priest would get you out of this?”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.” I rubbed my earlobe. “But just to be clear—would that be an out?”

“No. You agreed to a covenant with a demon. No priestly intervention would nullify that contract, or absolve you of the consequences for breaking it.”

Crap. There went that idea.

“So hiding in a convent for the rest of my life—”

“Wouldn’t work. You’d be dead and burning in Hell before you even got there.” He glanced at the clock on the facade of the church spire. “We have an hour left to fulfill the terms of the contract. I doubt you’d make it to a convent in time. Not that being on Holy ground would do you any good, anyway.” He smirked. “That’s a nice little myth invented by humans.”

Dread settled in my stomach. “Hold up—what did you mean by ‘burning in Hell?’”

“If you fail to fulfill the contract, you die and your soul goes straight to Hell to be punished.” He paused, tilting his head as if in thought. “Of course, we don’t always burn the damned souls. That’s just one method of torture. There’s also the ice box, the shredder, the spikes and presses, feeding time for the hellhounds, the acid bath, the David Hasselhoff music marathon—”

“All right, all right, got it!” I rubbed my face with both hands.

Behind me, the priest kept murmuring prayer after prayer, his voice breaking.

“Can you at least tone down your demonic impressiveness?” I asked quietly with a nod to the poor cleric at my back.

Or better yet... I turned around and touched the priest’s arm. He jumped and gaped at me, his face a mask of terror.

“Go,” I said softly.

There was nothing he could do to help me, and he didn’t need to stay in a veritable demon’s presence any longer than necessary. He’d already been traumatized enough.

“Go,” I repeated with more insistence.

The priest startled as if waking up from a trance. One more fearful look over my shoulder, and then he turned to run.

Or rather, tried to. He stopped mid-movement, frozen in place as if someone had pressed pause on his personal movie.

“Actually,” the demon’s dark voice came from behind me, “he can do the honors of being witness.”

I whirled around and glared at him. “You’re really into forcing people to do stuff for you, huh?”

He cut me a withering look. “*You forced me* into this contract. And we need a witness.”

“You can’t make a priest officiate this—” I gestured wildly between us “—for a demon. That’s cruel!”

“First of all, he doesn’t need to officiate. He just needs to witness our vows. Second—you’re pleading with a demon not to be cruel?”

Ugh.

“We need a witness,” the demon went on, “and he’s conveniently here right now. He’ll stand witness for our wedding, end of discussion.”

Delayed emotional reactions are a weird thing. I’d been arguing with this jerkface the entire time, but it was this instance of the word *wedding* that triggered the reality of what was happening to break over me like a tidal wave. I swayed under the impact, grasped the church door to steady myself.

Wedding.

To a demon.

To live in Hell.

Fuck me.

I’d never wanted to get married—well, not entirely true. Pre-thirteen-year-old me had held hopes for a romantic, grand wedding to the man of my dreams, a notion I had later come to despise as naive and foolhardy. Marriage was nothing but a sham built on lies and betrayal.

It had been eleven years, but the wound still burned as raw as the day I’d sat on those stairs, listening to my mother’s screams, my dad’s increasingly frustrated shouts...watching him drive off, eventually, to live with his other family.

So yeah, the concept of marriage? Something I’d sneered at for the past decade, so sure I’d never make that mistake.

Turned out I’d already made it when I was thirteen and got this whole covenant thing rolling.

Why, oh why couldn't I have simply played with a standard-issue ouija board, like any respectable teen?

But no, instead I'd dabbled in the kind of real dark shit that made me end up stuck between a rock and a hard place. No matter what I did, I'd end up in Hell. Either as a bride to a cranky demon, or as a damned soul. And if Hell was anything like the mythological descriptions of it... I shuddered.

"Priest," the demon called out, snapping his fingers.

The miserable cleric moved closer, stiffly and with halting steps, as if—forced to walk against his will.

I felt sick to my stomach.

"Don't do this to him," I bit out.

The demon ignored me, instructing the priest how to witness our union.

"Please find someone else." There, I'd even used the pretty P word.

It was like he didn't even hear me. I might as well have been talking to a bush.

Well, if this was a taste of the rest of our marriage, it got me fuming already. If there was one thing to which I responded with irrational pettiness, it was being ignored.

"You're acting like this is a done deal," I said loudly and crossed my arms.

The demon paused in verbally wrangling the priest into submission and turned to me. "Don't be silly." His tone was so condescending that heat rolled through my body in a searing wave of indignation. "The choice is clear. Pretending to still waver is laughable at best. We both know you don't want to suffer the consequences of breaking the covenant."

I pursed my lips. "Oh, I don't know. Seems to me breaking the contract would result in consequences for you too, since you're the other party to the agreement and all. What's the punishment for you? Will you be tortured as well?"

He narrowed his eyes.

"Maybe you'll be demoted?" I continued, my anger about being ignored fueling my probably suicidal poking of Mr. Tall, Dark, and smokingly Handsome. "Will they make you scrub demon toilets for the next thousand years? Or maybe they'll strip you of your powers and take your wings?"

The heat emanating from him flared up like a bonfire liberally sprinkled with gasoline.

Bingo. I smiled. "That's it, huh? No more convenient demon magic and flaming wings for you. So," I said, idly regarding my nails, "if I were *petty*—because, say, a certain groom-to-be has been a dismissive jerk with no respect for my opinion—I could totally decide to break the covenant and make you suffer along with me."

The demon bared his teeth. "You wouldn't."

"You underestimate my level of petty," I snapped. "If I'm going to be miserable in Hell either way, I might as well share my pain with His Demonic Haughtiness."

"Stop being dramatic," he growled. "You cannot seriously compare being married to me with being tortured as a damned soul."

"Why not? You're doing a bang-up job of making me see the similarities."

His wings vibrated. The thrumming power in the air increased, pressing onto every inch of my skin. I had trouble breathing against the thickness of his energy, like I'd just walked into a hot house with enough humidity to constrict my airways.

The priest whimpered.

Gritting my teeth, I steeled my fluttering nerves. "Tone. It. Down."

The demon snarled at me. Not the kind of figurative snarl of humans when they're cranky, no. The sound coming from his throat was that of a canine warning you not to be stupid. It was the bone-

chilling, rumbling growl that humans had instinctively learned to fear—and heed. The hairs on my arms and neck stood up, and I had the insistent urge to back away slowly.

Fuck. That.

I would marry this ass because I truly didn't have a choice, but I would rather burn in Hell than enter this marriage cowering in fear. So he would either have to start playing nice or I would throw all reason to the wind and break this fucking covenant.

"If you want me to agree to this wedding," I said, surprised my voice came out steady past the lump of dread in my throat, "then you need to adjust your attitude. You've been condescending, scornful, and dismissive. I asked you not to force the priest to witness, and you ignored me. Let him go, treat me with respect, and I'll consent to the marriage."

"Respect," he gritted out, "goes both ways. You attacked me with pepper spray—" he held up one finger "—you lied to me—" he held up a second finger "—and you ran away from me trying to sneak out of a contract you initiated." He added a third finger. "Don't lecture me on respect when you've been untruthful, evasive, and insulting all night."

Oh, that self-righteous bastard.

"Excuse me for freaking out that a real-life demon showed up unannounced in my living room!"

"It wouldn't have been unannounced if you hadn't *forgotten* you summoned me!"

Gah, we already sounded like an old married couple.

"Fine, so we both made mistakes!" I threw my hands up. "But if you think I'm bluffing and will cave and marry you anyway, you've got another think coming. You want something from me, and you're going to be nice about it or you'll end up without your powers. And we both know you can't *force* me to marry you."

Granted, I was gambling. I didn't *know* that for sure, but I had a hunch the contract—the pertinent parts of which still eluded me—might have a provision like that. Just like it probably had one that specified he couldn't kill me to get out of it—because if it didn't, I was certain I'd be dead already.

His eye twitched.

Right on the mark. I made a mental fist pump. "You can't use force or coercion, which means you will actually have to be *nice* to me if you want to keep your demon powers. I'm asking you to let the priest go and find someone else—without using your infernal powers of intimidation. We just need a witness, right? So let's go grab a semi-drunk from a bar and tell them to listen to our vows. They'll probably think it's cute. Boom, done! No one got forced or traumatized."

The demon stared at me for such a long moment, I had to resist the urge to start humming the Jeopardy melody.

I shifted my weight from one foot to another, but kept eye contact with him. I had a feeling this was a decisive moment, that looking away or lowering my gaze would send the wrong message. Like that one time I won the stare down against the bully cat of the neighborhood, after which that cantankerous feline would finally let me pass its favorite hedge without swiping at my legs.

The demon uttered a sound between a sigh and a snarl and rolled his eyes heavenward. "You're insufferable."

Me, insufferable? That was rich coming from the dude who'd been a pain in my ass all night. I relaxed a little, though, relieved I didn't have to hold his gaze any longer. The contact had been so intense that I'd wanted to squirm. Beautiful his eyes might be, they were far too perceptive for my liking.

Some people you meet, when they look at you, their gaze seems to bounce off you, like sure, they notice you're there, but it's surface level. Mostly, that suits me just fine.

But then there are those whose perception of you catches you off-guard. When they look at you, their attention arrests you, their gaze cuts deeper, and suddenly you feel exposed, naked in a way you're not used to. Like they can read every minute detail of your expression, your voice, the way you breathe.

It has nothing to do with sexual attraction or gender—I've met people from all kinds of identities who had that effect on me.

But when it *is* coupled with a simmering sexual attraction—unbidden and annoying as it might be—it makes the intensity of that contact even worse.

Anytime I had to hold the demon's gaze longer than three seconds, I felt layers of myself unwrap themselves that I sure as fuck wanted to keep as tightly folded as the silly love notes I used to pass in class to my crush in second grade. Those were origami-style intricate.

The demon had meanwhile turned to the priest and released the poor guy from whatever spell he'd been under. The priest shuddered, shook himself, and threw an anxious glance at me. I nodded at him to leave. There was nothing he could do for me.

The next moment he'd run toward the parking lot, likely to get his car and get the fuck out. I sighed wistfully. Getting the fuck out sure sounded great.

Alas, I was still sort of betrothed to an overbearing jerk of a demon—who just in that moment snapped his fingers in front of my face.

I turned slowly toward the bane of my existence, fully intending to skewer him with a furious look, only to be brought up short by his magnetic appearance.

He'd toned down the dark vibe and retracted the wings, leaving only a trace of his energy, which unfairly came across as sexy smolder.

He should *not* be smoldering at me, goddammit.

And yet he looked like something out of a sensual fever dream, all dark hair and piercing eyes, his attention on me causing the perfect mix of thrill and danger.

Awareness raced over my skin in tiny, delicious shivers. If this were a dream, I'd climb him like a tree.

"Get moving," he said, effectively dousing the flames of my irrational desire. "We've lost enough time with your capricious demands."

"Watch," I gritted out, holding up a finger, "your tone. I can still decide to damn it all to hell—literally—and break this covenant if you keep being insulting."

The muscles in his face contracted, turning him into a vision of suppressed rage. He probably wasn't used to someone standing up to him. His Grouchiness was likely a high-ranking demon in Hell, with underlings and subordinates who withered at his glower. Must be nice to have others waiting on you and jumping to fulfill orders. It would also explain a lot of his behavior, not that it made me more forgiving toward his assholishness.

"Find a bar," he growled, "so we can secure an inebriated individual for the ceremony."

I whipped out my phone and looked up the nearest establishment that promised to have at least one poor drunk who would play along. Turned out the bar was just a block away, open late, and seemed popular for cocktails among the younger crowd. Perfect.

"This way." I indicated the direction with a nod and started walking.

My own personal demon trailed me like a brooding shadow. He didn't speak a word, and I was just fine with that, considering anytime he'd opened his mouth earlier only made me want to strangle him.

Which was a novelty for me. I usually didn't harbor violent thoughts toward others, even when

they annoyed the crap out of me. But with this guy, I had the clear vision of putting my hands around his throat and squeezing *hard*. Of course, given I was puny compared to him, as well as his supernatural ability to not even blink when exposed to pepper spray, all I would accomplish by trying to strangle him would be to dangle off his neck like a grotesque human piece of jewelry.

We'd arrived at the bar, which had a few outside tables clustered around heaters on the sidewalk in front of the entrance. One of them was occupied by three women my age who looked to be deep into their cocktails, judging by their slurred speech and high-pitched giggles.

I turned toward the demon to tell him to let me do the talking. The thought of His Menacing Surliness attempting to persuade three humans to "witness our vows" gave me the heebie jeebies. One look at his broody face, and they'd run for cover.

Before I could even get the words out, he'd stepped past me to the table, one hand in his pants pocket, the other on his heart, and made a small bow. "Good evening, ladies," he crooned in a voice that made sensual heat slick over my nerve endings, centering between my legs. "Forgive the intrusion, but I was hoping you'd be so kind to help me and my fiancée out."

All three women stared at him, spellbound.

"This might sound silly," he continued, his tone soothing and invigorating at the same time. His voice was mesmerizing, making me inch closer. "But we're getting married tomorrow, rather spontaneously, and we'd love to do a run-through of the ceremony in front of someone else."

The women had leaned toward him as he spoke, enraptured.

My mouth hung open.

"You see, we eloped." The demon gave them a smile that made my heart stumble. "And we don't have any friends or family here to practice with. We'd be ever so grateful if you lovely ladies listened to our impromptu vows."

The women sighed and giggled, one of them twisting a strand of her hair while giving him the most obvious bedroom eyes I'd ever seen someone sport.

Oh. My. God.

This jerk of a demon could be Prince fucking Charming—when he wanted to. My blood boiled. He'd been an ass to me all night, and here he was being the epitome of a gentleman, with an ease I'd never thought him capable of considering his condescending demeanor toward me.

While I'd been stewing in my renewed irritation about my betrothed, the women had all but fallen over themselves to agree. The demon turned to me, a glint of something I couldn't quite place in his stormy eyes. His smirk held a distinctive smugness I wanted to erase with acid.

"Shall we?" he asked.

My answering smile may have shown too much teeth.

"Dearly beloved," the black-haired of the women intoned with all the fine enunciation of someone on their third cocktail.

Her two friends snickered as she went on with a rather garbled medley of an officiant's speech that was likely pieced together from various movies and TV shows featuring a wedding.

Finally, she arrived at the pertinent part. "I..." She trailed off, gesturing to the demon.

"Azazel," he supplied, and his name sent a shiver down my spine.

"I, Azazel," she repeated, with minimal butchering of the syllables, "will take you..."

"Zoe," I offered.

"Will take you, Zoe, to be my lawfully bedded—"

"Wedded!" her friends shrieked.

"Sorry!" She threw up her hands against her friends' slapping. "Lawfully wedded wife, to have

and to hold, in sickness and in health—”

“—for richer or poorer!” her brunette friend threw in.

“—for better or for worse!” the blonde suggested.

“—come hell or high water,” the black-haired woman added, and her friends oooohed.

“That’s a good one,” the brunette said. “Oh, oh, add this one—to be your loving and faithful husband.”

“—from this day forward,” the blonde chimed in.

“—until death do us part,” the black-haired woman continued, pointing at the demon with her cocktail straw. “This is my vow.”

He raised a brow and faced me. His eyes held a lightning storm, his veneer of charm and primal attractiveness barely concealing the twitch of fury in his features. The women didn’t notice, but I sure did. I’d had the good luck of watching his face contort in anger all evening, and this was a new level of wrath. The air hummed with his restrained power, causing the outside space heaters to crackle.

“I, Azazel,” he began, his voice like rough-spun silk over my skin, “take thee, Zoe, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, come hell or high water—” his eyes flashed at the word *hell* “—to be your...loving and...faithful husband, until death do us part.” He paused, and a weight settled between us. “This is my vow.”

It hadn’t escaped me how he’d stumbled a bit over the *loving and faithful* part. I narrowed my eyes.

The women’s “awwwww” drew me back into the moment. I took a deep breath and swallowed. This was it. If I said my vow, I’d be shackled to this grouch for—would that be eternity? What kind of lifespan did demons have? Would I now live as long as him?

And there would be no going back. I was sure *divorce* was not an option for this particular union. What kind of life would await me? How much pain and misery?

My stomach turned. I had to gasp for air because the weight on my chest wouldn’t let me breathe deeply. Spots of light danced through my vision, I swayed and—

A large hand closed around my upper arm like a band of hot steel. I jerked and met the demon’s eyes, the connection so raw, so vibrant, it stripped me of anything but the awareness of his presence, his power. My lips formed the words before my brain caught up.

“I, Zoe, take thee, Azazel—” speaking his name intensified the fiery connection of our eyes “—to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, come—” I made a small sound of despair “—hell or high water, to be your loving and faithful wife, until death do us part.” My breath hitched on the last, fateful words. “This is my vow.”

Something snapped into place between us, hot and piercing, strong and supple, a tide of energy so fierce it would have knocked me off my feet if he hadn’t still held onto my left arm.

I couldn’t breathe.

His other hand took hold of my right shoulder, the contact searing, branding, while a storm raged in his eyes. Fine muscles ticked under the hard planes of his face, his cruel beauty like a blade, cold and cutting.

I was still choking on air.

“Now kiss!” The squeal came from somewhere to my right.

“Kiss, kiss, kiss!” The other women chanted.

I tried to draw in air. My lungs flat-out refused.

Dizziness crept in, the pounding of my heart slowing drumbeat in my head. I fought it, but my eyelids slid down, my vision going dark—

The sizzling heat of his mouth on mine.

My eyes flew open. My lips parted without my doing, and his breath rushed into me. A firebrand, all the way down to my soul. My lungs started working with a jerk, I grabbed his shirt—my fingers finding purchase somewhere between armored plates—and held onto him for dear life.

He growled into my mouth, a sound as sensual as it was threatening, and then he licked over my lips, slipped his tongue between and touched mine.

And I was done for. The shudder that wrecked me was embarrassingly close to an orgasm. My entire body was abuzz with arousal.

I gasped as he let go and stepped back, keeping one hand on my shoulder to steady me.

“Woohoo!” The women hollered.

“Now that’s a kiss!”

“God, I wish someone would lay one like that on me...”

The others sighed in assent.

“Y’all are so cute,” the blonde said, a dreamy expression on her face.

I focused on her and the others, anything to avoid looking back at the demon who had just shortcircuited my system. My thoughts were still ajumble, and I refused to unjumble them.

Her brunette friend raised her glass. “To the happy couple!”

The other two joined in the toast.

“May you always cherish and love each other,” the black-haired woman slurred.

“May your marriage be full of joy and the *right* kind of excitement.” The blonde grinned.

“May God bless you and the home you build together,” the brunette said.

The black-haired woman leaned forward and held up a finger. “And may you never lie, cheat, or steal. But if you must lie, lie with each other. And if you must cheat, cheat death. And if you must steal, steal each other’s hearts, every day anew.”

Her friends gasped. “That’s a good one!”

“Right? It was in this movie with...”

I didn’t hear the rest of it because my entire awareness zeroed in on the male presence right next to me. He wasn’t touching me anymore, but he might as well have been. His energy was palpable, a tangible force that hovered so close, I expected to feel the physical touch of it any second. And that thing between us, the power that had snapped taut like a rope as soon as I’d spoken my vows, it hummed like an electric field, making the hairs on my arms rise.

“Ladies,” the demon purred, and it took all of me not to purr back, dammit. “Thank you so much for your assistance. You have truly made our night, but I’m afraid we must be going now. Big day tomorrow.”

I chanced a sideways glance at him and almost melted on the spot. He positively glowed with an inner fire, alluring, mesmerizing, his expression full of self-assured satisfaction. He exuded the quiet, confident power of a man fully in control of himself and in charge of the situation, a magnetic combination that was sure to attract any woman’s—and man’s—attention nearby.

And something about it rubbed me the wrong way.

Somewhere in the back of my head rang a warning bell, some hindbrain part of my consciousness raising the alarm.

The women virtually fawned over him as he said our goodbyes. I had the distinct impression that if he’d winked at them, he would have sent them sliding off their chairs.

“Come.” His hand pressed into my lower back, and goosebumps broke out over my arms. “Let’s go home.”

It hit me then.

That warning bell...it was the realization that the tables had turned.

Up until this point, I’d had a modicum of power. All the things I’d managed to make him do, like letting the priest go, finding someone drunk to witness, treating me with an illusion of respect, they’d only been possible because I’d had leverage. As long as I could still break the covenant and damn him and me to the consequences—consequences he wanted to avoid at all costs—I’d held a bargaining position. It hadn’t fully leveled the playing field, but it had given me some semblance of power when facing him.

That sliver of power was now gone.

He’d gotten what he wanted. I’d agreed to the marriage, and by doing so, I’d given up the only piece of leverage I’d had. He basically owned me now. He had no more incentive to treat me well, or even with an iota of civility. The covenant probably spelled out that he couldn’t kill me—*probably*—but other than that? He could very well be free to do whatever he wanted with me.

And given how much I’d aggravated him all night, the likelihood of me ending up roasting above a pit of hellfire for the next hundred years now loomed over me in stark contrast to the bravado I’d sported earlier.

Shit, shit, shit.

I knew one day my mouth would get me in trouble. Of course, I’d thought it would be the kind of trouble like saying the wrong thing to a cop during a traffic stop or something. Not putting me at the mercy of a demon with a cruel glint in his eye.

I hadn’t noticed how we’d walked away from the bar, had rounded the corner into a smaller street. Out of sight of the bar’s patrons and the occasional passerby on the larger street, the demon let his hand fall away from my lower back and turned to me.

I would not squeak. I would not squeak.

Not meeting his gaze, I shifted on my feet. His energy vibrated over my skin, pulled on the thing between us. My breath seemed to echo in the narrow street, the night far too quiet for a city this large.

A rustling sound startled me a second before my eyes caught the explosion of flame-licked feathers in my periphery.

I squeaked and darted back.

The demon’s wings rose behind his back, caressed by fire, a thing of primal beauty. He spread them once, the tips almost brushing the buildings’ walls on either side, and then shook them before resting them in a half-folded position.

He closed the distance to me, grabbed my waist when I wanted to scoot away again. “Hold on.”

“What?”

“Do you want to be a human pancake?”

I stared at him in confusion.

“That’s what will happen if you let go.”

With those words, he stepped even closer and hefted me up with one arm under my knees, the other around my back. Instinctively, I slung my arms around his neck, my heart pounding.

I had a second of thinking, *Good God, he’s going to fly*, and then he lifted off.

Air rushed around me, the wind whipped my hair into my eyes, and I didn’t dare loosen one hand from my death grip at his neck to clear my vision. All I saw were glimpses of lights spreading somewhere beneath us, a half-clouded sky that was way too close, and slivers of flame dancing over

onyx feathers. The thump of his wing beats drowned out the whoosh of air.

He banked, and my stomach rolled over. I screamed.

“Quit that,” he growled.

Excuse the fuck out of me for shrieking in your ear when you’re flying in loops worse than the most terrorizing rollercoaster I’ve ever been on. That’s what I wanted to snap back at him. Of course, all I got out was another panicked scream.

The demon made a sound between disgust and frustration, and when he banked again and the next helpless shriek wanted to claw its way out of my throat—it got stuck. The sound wouldn’t come out.

My guts roiled, nausea crawled up into my mouth, but for the life of me, I couldn’t get a sound out.

That bastard had done something to my vocal cords.

My hands were in the perfect position to close around his throat and squeeze, and for a second there, I considered it. But, alas, my sense of self-preservation won out. Trying to strangle the guy who held me a thousand feet in the air would have topped any Stupidest Thing I Ever Did list.

I settled for cursing him silently.

With the next swoop, the wind and flight movement pushed my head against his shoulder, and my face landed in the curve of his neck. The skin-to-skin contact jolted me, a sizzling connection I felt all the way down to my toes. His wing beats became irregular for a second, and his arms flexed around me.

So close, I had no choice but to inhale his scent—leather, bonfire, and something invigorating, some sort of spice. My lips parted against his skin, and—involuntarily, as if in trance—I slid out my tongue and tasted him.

His flight pattern faltered. We dropped, and my stomach rose to meet my throat. I wrenched my mouth away from his skin. Closing my eyes, I let my mortification heat all the parts of my body that had grown cold and numb from the chill in the air.

I had just licked him.

Licked. Him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“Other parts of my body,” he murmured in my ear, his voice humming with barely concealed mockery, “are even more delicious, if you’re hungry.”

Ugh. That smug ass. I so wanted to shoot him a snarky reply, but—oh yeah, my vocal cords were still disabled thanks to His Douchery. Also, I wasn’t sure anything would have gotten past the embarrassment currently making my heart pound so loud it drowned out the wind.

He banked once more, and this time the lights in my peripheral vision moved closer. My stomach confirmed we were in a landing maneuver. His wings beat the air in more forceful strides, slowing our descent. I held on all the tighter, lest I drop the last few hundred feet.

He landed in a fluid, graceful motion that seemed impossible given his size and the impetus he still had from his flight. Loosening his arms from around me, he let me slide down his front. He probably intended for my feet to hit the floor, which totally would have happened, had I not kept my death grip around his neck. As it was, I sort of dangled there, having come full circle to be the grotesque piece of human jewelry I’d quipped about earlier.

I didn’t do it on purpose. I just couldn’t pry my fingers apart. Somewhere between the cold from the flight and my terror of falling, my muscles had locked in this position.

“You can let go.” His voice rumbled against my cheek, which was pressed against his chest.

I cleared my throat. Oh, look, my vocal cords were back! “Yeah. Um. I can’t.”

“Getting attached so quickly?”

Arrogant jerk.

With a sigh of suffering patience, he reached behind his neck and dislodged my fingers. I stumbled to the ground in a graceless thump.

My fingers touched grass and dirt. I glanced around me. We were in some sort of park, lawn stretching out behind me, a cluster of trees in front. Lights shone in the distance, not strong enough to illuminate the darkness of this corner of the park.

“Where are we?” I scrambled to a stand, dusting myself off.

The demon had turned his back on me, his enormous wings half obscuring his body. “The gate in the East Bay.”

“Gate?”

“To Hell.”

I swallowed. On instinct, I scanned my surroundings, my gecko brain looking for an escape. Shit was getting real. This was it. After what I’d seen tonight, my mind didn’t even doubt the fact there was a gate to Hell here, and that once through it, I was well and truly fucked.

My pulse sped up, sweat broke out on my skin. Maybe I could—

“Don’t,” the demon said, his voice bored. He didn’t even bother to turn around, just kept on making weird gestures in the air.

Drawing, I realized. He was drawing signs. The symbols he wrote lit up for a second before fading again, and I squinted to make out what they looked like. Runes? Some version of ancient hieroglyphs? It was hard to tell.

With a start, I realized that if I really vanished through whatever portal to Hell in a minute, I wouldn’t be able to say goodbye to my friends and family. Not that saying “goodbye” was a feasible idea to anyone who wasn’t in the know about what was actually happening here. The only person who’d understand was Taylor. I’d promised to call her when I was safe.

I almost laughed. Safe I was most definitely not. But I had to let her know, had to give her something.

I took out my phone, opened it to messages, and stared at the screen with the last texts we’d sent each other earlier today, when spending my birthday alone had been the biggest of my worries.

My throat knotted together.

Tay, I began. The priest didn’t work. He caught me. He’ll take me with him in a minute. If you don’t hear from me again...

I paused, my eyes burning.

...please know I love you. Thank you for being my friend.

I hit Send and immediately opened the messages to my mom. My text was simple, the only thing I could write, the only thing that mattered.

I love you.

She’d see it in the morning, and when she next tried to call me, she would only get my voicemail, or a disconnected signal. She’d wonder, worry, call again and again, call my work, where I hadn’t appeared, and then the horror of it would dawn on her. I imagined what losing me would do to her, and my heart broke, its shards piercing me in a million places.

A sob tore out of my throat. Through the tears clouding my vision, I saw the demon turn around, the blurry outlines of a doorway glowing behind him.

I pressed my hand over my mouth, tried to hold in the pain, but it escaped nonetheless, in the tears flowing hot over my cheeks, in the sobs wrecking my body.

“Stop that.” I couldn’t make out the demon’s features anymore, but his voice held an edge I hadn’t

heard before.

My only answer was another wet sob.

His wings flared restlessly. He gestured at the doorway. "This won't hurt you."

"It's not that," I got out between gulps of air. Sniffing, I wiped at my cheeks, my breath stuttering. "I'll never see them again."

And they won't ever see me again. That part was almost worse. Just the idea that I was going to be plucked out of this life, just disappeared like the victim in some gruesome true crime documentary, that my mom would be left wondering, hoping, searching for a clue because she didn't even have the closure of my body being found... It would tear her apart.

And my dad—I pressed my fist against my mouth in an effort to stem the tangle of emotions associated with him, most of which I'd never dared to examine further. To say my relationship with him was rocky was the understatement of the century. I'd all but cut any contact to him, even though he'd tried, again and again over the years to make amends for his past mistakes. But some wounds just went too deep.

Or so I'd thought.

Now, faced with the prospect of truly never seeing him again... The sharp hurt in my chest seemed too much like regret.

"You can." The demon's voice pulled me out of my miserable thoughts.

"What?"

"See them again." When I squinted at him through tear-clouded eyes, he went on, "You can visit."

My heart stumbled over its own rhythm. I sniffled, blinked several times to clear my vision. "Really?" God, why did I sound so pathetic?

"Yes. Now stop...that." He waved at my face.

I pulled a tissue out of my bag and blew my nose. The sound echoed uncomfortably loud in the silence of the park. My throat still raw, eyes burning with the aftermath of my crying, I followed his gesture when he beckoned me closer. The doorway shimmered behind him, an impossibility for the rational part of my mind, but given that one of the demon's huge wings brushed my back, that rational part had pretty much called it a night.

I wished I could as well.

Sudden bone-deep weariness drenched me, pulled me down like a lead weight. I just wanted to go to sleep and wake up in the morning and realize this had all been a weird dream. I didn't want to fight with an overbearing demon who may or may not yet decide to torture me for his pleasure. I didn't want to face whatever awaited me in Hell. Not to mention processing the trauma of being ripped from my familiar life.

My maudlin whinologue was interrupted by the demon unceremoniously picking me up as he'd done before. Immediately, I snaked my arms around his neck.

"Are we going to fly again?"

"In a minute."

With that, he stepped up to the glowing doorway, and I had the ludicrous thought of how ironic it was that he was going to carry me over a threshold like a traditional bride.

I snickered.

The demon canted his head and peered down on me. "Something funny?"

"Nothing." I pressed my lips together to keep from grinning. "Carry on."

And that did it. I burst out laughing.

He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Humans" and continued walking.

I hid my face against his shoulder, still giggling. I was losing it. This time well and truly. One of my fuses must have snapped, and I had entered the phase of trauma response that made people act ridiculously, like laughing when their life went to shit right in front of their eyes.

In the periphery of my vision, the glow of the doorway was super close now. The demon took one more step, and the shimmer enfolded us.

CHAPTER 3

DARKNESS.

Silence.

I didn't even hear my own breath.

Pressure all around us, growing, growing, growing, until my ears popped and the demon stepped out into light again.

I took a deep breath—and inhaled an incongruent mix of ash-flecked air and the scent of flowers. The sky above was dark blue streaked with red, casting everything in a fiery glow.

“Lord Azazel.”

The voice came from our right, and I craned my neck to take a peek.

The demon—my demon, Azazel—tightened his arms around me and pressed me closer to his chest. He even pushed his hand that was behind my shoulders up to my head and shoved my face back against him, making any attempt at seeing who had spoken to him impossible.

“If you breathe one word of this to anyone,” Azazel said, his voice a shard of ice, “I will make sure you are stripped of your hides and hung by your intestines for a hundred years.”

My heart stopped for a moment, before two voices snapped, “Yes, my lord.”

Good grief, I'd thought he'd spoken to me. I'd been ready to crawl into the nearest corner to hide based on the vicious note in his voice—one he hadn't ever used on me. Yet.

He took two steps then paused, half turned back. “That includes *her*. Not. A. Word.”

“Understood.”

I barely had time to take another breath before he lifted off with a mighty thump of his wings. We soared, higher and higher, the fire-licked sky a dramatic painting all around us.

I couldn't make out much of the landscape below, but lights twinkled in the darkness here and there, some clustered together just like on Earth. Settlements, probably, some form of villages or towns.

Or maybe that was where they tortured the damned souls.

I shivered.

The air here didn't have the same chill as in San Francisco, instead it felt like I'd opened the oven and received a blast of dry heat right in my face. Particles of ash clung to my hair, my lashes, and I had to blink hard not to get any in my eyes.

A thought hit me, made nausea roil in my belly.

“The ash...” I rasped. “Is it...it's not...”

“Sinners?”

I nodded, didn't dare open my mouth again for fear of getting particles right on my tongue.

“No.” He angled his wings. “It’s Hell itself. The land burns. The trees burn. Every part of her incinerates itself from time to time.”

Oh, thank God.

Then my brain caught up. “Does your...house randomly catch fire?” Did he even live in a house? Did demons have to sleep? I had so many questions.

“It’s manageable.”

That...didn’t sound very reassuring. I squirmed a bit in his hold, dread pooling in my stomach. My mind swirled with ideas of what kind of “accommodations” would await me, and none of them settled the unease churning inside me.

Sounds echoed in the semi-darkness. Like a dirge, mournful and slow, a chorus of wails rose from somewhere beneath us. It took me a moment to identify the sound—I’d never heard human voices like that, but human they were.

We must be flying over some form of torture pit then.

Bile crept up into my throat. The wails were so full of suffering, such sharp pain and despair, it tore at my soul. The one time I’d heard something remotely similar was when I’d watched a documentary on slaughterhouses. The pigs’ screaming had rattled me so much that I’d gone vegetarian that same day.

But these here were *people*. Human souls, each one of them once alive and now still sentient and feeling. And I could taste every one of their painful emotions like a cloying perfume in the ash-flecked air.

A horrible thought flashed through my mind. The demon could simply drop me here. He might—*might*—not be allowed to kill me as per the nebulous contract between us, but what would stop him from opening his arms, prying my fingers loose and simply letting me plummet into whatever pit of writhing bodies in pain? As long as I was still alive, he wouldn’t have violated the covenant, right?

It probably wouldn’t even be a big deal to him. He’d shrug and go on. Because how much could someone who came from a torture dimension care? Making people suffer would be in his nature.

I shivered despite the searing heat. It hit me now, worse than before. Back when we’d walked away from the bar, the realization that I was at his complete and utter mercy had been more of an abstract one. The fear I’d felt had been more subtle, my mind not quite grasping the full details of the mess I’d gotten myself into.

Now, that fear morphed into bone-chilling panic. Faced with the very realness of this dimension, confronted with the acoustic proof of others being tortured, my earlier realization of my powerlessness became so very tangible that it threatened to arrest my breath.

I’d provoked him *so much*. I wasn’t sure how much worse I could have made the beginning of this sham of a marriage. I supposed I could have puked on his shoes or tried an actual Catholic exorcism on him, but even so, I was now likely high on his shit list.

High enough to warrant the treatment of a damned soul? I didn’t *know*. And that uncertainty shook me to my core.

I should have bargained for another contract, one that stipulated he couldn’t hurt me, when I still held a grain of leverage over him. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Why hadn’t I thought of that? I totally could have made him agree to certain terms under the threat of not marrying him and thereby dooming him to lose his powers.

I had nothing left to bargain with, and I’d missed my chance at securing a modicum of a civilized existence for myself down here.

There was a reason I hadn't gone to law school...

All that was left was to hope for some form of leniency from a being that had probably slurped sinners' suffering for breakfast for thousands of years.

I couldn't undo what I'd done so far, but I could try to be more agreeable and less...*me* from now on. Maybe, if I just made myself small and invisible, didn't draw his attention, I could get by.

My mind firmly settled into gecko brain mode. New goal: *survive, appease, avoid pain.*

The demon banked, and the lights below drew closer. A howl rent the air, making me jerk in the demon's arms. I'd heard wolves howling before, an eerie enough sound to unnerve any human with a bit of a primitive survival instinct.

This was nothing like it. As if a thousand screams were trapped inside it, the sound changed and audibly oscillated, rising and falling, whispering and roaring, the primal aggression of it raising the hairs on my arms and neck, making my muscles twitch with the urge to run.

I had an inkling, still I asked. "What is that?"

"My hellhounds. They patrol the grounds."

He had hellhounds. Of course he did.

A desperate sound between a laugh and a sob wanted to wrench itself out of my throat. I swallowed that sucker down. *Survive, appease, avoid pain.*

"Lovely," I croaked.

We swooped lower still, over the sounds of his monstrous pets baying—in welcome?—toward a large, dark structure squatting in the middle of the landscape still shrouded in gloom. I could barely make out details of the building, only that it loomed in the darkness like a fortress of epic proportions. Few lights illuminated the walls, flames flickering over what might be stone.

The demon began his landing maneuver, and I curled my fingers harder into his collar. Again, he managed a touchdown far more graceful than I'd anticipated, folding his wings neatly behind his back as he strode forward. No stopping this time, no letting me go to stumble to the ground.

Now closer to the fortress, I could make out more details. We'd landed on a small platform that jutted out from the wall, like a large balcony without a railing. From what I could tell, we were still high up, several stories above the ground level. The wall had a door and two windows—with what looked like iron bars attached to them. Fire burned in sconces next to the wall.

The demon swiftly walked up to the door and loosened the arm that supported my shoulders. I had to scramble to reinforce my grip on his neck and collar so I wouldn't just slip and dangle with my upper body. Thanks for the warning, jerk.

As with the gate in the park, he drew signs in the air, each lighting up for a second before fading again. The door opened with a hiss, and he pushed through, letting it fall shut again behind us. His wings disappeared with a sound of susurration. I stared at the spots on his back where just a second ago his mighty wings had sprouted. There weren't even slits left over in his fighting gear. It was as if he'd never even had them to begin with.

He strode on without pause, through a semi-dark room that appeared to feature a huge bed and a seating area. I only had a few seconds of trying to take in the surroundings before he'd reached the next door and marched into another room, some sort of sitting room judging by the sofas.

And on he went. Through another door, into a hallway lit by flickering sconces, the walls dark stone, painted in shadows. All the way, he carried me without a sign of letting up.

Under any other circumstances, with a different man, this might have been deemed romantic, but instinctively, I knew better. Something in the way he held me and walked spoke of necessity rather than affection. His face was all hard angles and inscrutable beauty, not a hint of softness or

benevolence. He was as detached as if carrying a package.

It shouldn't have rankled, but it did.

Here and there I saw movement in the periphery of my vision, shadows scattering or something slithering toward the ceiling. We encountered a group of small creatures, three feet tall at the most and looking disturbingly like a mix between a house-elf from Harry Potter and the yucky thing cuddling up to Jabba the Hutt in Star Wars: Return of the Jedi.

As one, the group threw itself on the floor, heads bowed, as the demon walked by. I peeked over his shoulder once we'd passed and watched them scramble back up to a stand after a moment, chattering and busying themselves with what looked like cleaning. House-elves indeed. Not as cute as Dobby, though.

After what seemed like an eternity of traversing hallway after hallway, winding staircases and maze-like turns and bends, the demon finally stopped in front of a door. He let go, and I slid-hopped down his front and managed to stand without falling over, which I was quite proud of, given the fact I was rather stiff from being carried in the same position for possibly hours.

He swung open the door and waved me inside.

Gingerly, I entered, expecting the worst.

What greeted me was far from that.

A spacious room, the stone walls whitewashed and reflecting the firelight from the sconces scattered around. Rugs on the floor, tapestries on the walls, comfy furniture to lounge on, decorative tables with books on them. For all intents and purposes, this was a beautifully appointed living room with a medieval flair.

Two more doors in the left- and right-hand walls stood open, and I walked over to peer through them. Door number one led to a room that was mostly empty except for some more rugs on the floor and...a treadmill? I blinked, shook my head and backed out to check out the other door.

It led into a bedroom, dominated by a large four-poster bed piled high with cushions, an armoire, two armchairs with a table set between them, and another door in the opposite wall. I glimpsed a shower and a sink through the doorway. A bathroom, then. Alrighty.

I turned back to the demon, who leaned against the wall in the sitting room, his arms crossed over his chest. As with every time I looked at him, I was jolted by his ethereal beauty, so unfair considering what he was. And I didn't mean demon. Jerks just shouldn't be this pretty.

Still, my accommodations were miles better than I'd feared. My stomach settled, the panic abating with the realization that, hey, this wasn't so bad. There were no torture instruments strung about, no fire pit to roast over, no monstrous hellhound ready to devour me. A knot loosened in my chest, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Maybe this would be okay. I could deal with a surly husband as long as I wasn't going to be locked in an Iron Maiden.

"These are your rooms," the demon said. "Your meals will be brought here. If you require anything else, lay your hand on the plaque next to the door, and someone will come to take your order."

Well, that sounded reasonable. And having my own rooms was a boon, a place where I could retreat and be alone. Heaven knew with a brooding ass like him for a husband, I'd need lots of me time.

"You are not to leave these rooms."

Wait, what? I opened my mouth, closed it again. Squinting at him, I modulated my tone in an effort not to show the spark of irritation inside me. "Then...you will come here?"

The demon's eyes glittered hard. "No."

My thoughts raced, same as my heart. Skin prickling, I tried to slow my breathing. "You just expect me to stay put here. Alone?"

Like a package he deposited in a storage unit.

The demon raised a brow, an arrogant gesture of confirmation without him having to utter a single word.

"Will I meet anyone else?"

"No."

I exhaled roughly, trying to stifle the bitter laugh scratching my throat. "So I am not allowed to leave, you won't come to see me, and I'll be locked in these rooms for all eternity without visitors? No one to talk to or interact with?"

"That's the plan."

Oh, that motherfucker.

What was this, some fucked up version of Jane Eyre?

Scratch trying to appease. Forget about being agreeable. My good intentions of surviving this hellscape of a marriage went up in flames as indignation burned through me.

"You pop up in my living room," I growled, "you pluck me from my life, drag me down to Hell, and then you just want to park me here out of sight and out of mind, not even making an effort to engage with me?"

He pushed off the wall, his eyes flashing like lightning, black shadows writhing around him. Two steps and he was right in front of me, towering with all the intimidation of a panther cornering a mouse. I had to crane my neck to even look at his face, but I refused to back away.

"Do you *want* me to engage with you?"

I shivered. The gecko part of my brain—you know, the one looking out for my survival, preferably in one piece—screamed at me that no, no, no, *engaging* with this dangerous hunk of a demon was a bad idea. As in, on a scale of one to Pandora opening that box, this was off the charts.

And yet...the anger boiling inside me burned away this more rational part of myself until what was left was a feral creature with bared teeth. I would take fighting with him over an eternity alone.

"I want," I snapped, "to not spend the rest of my days locked up by myself like some caged animal. I'll go mad!"

His dark power whispered behind him, forming a shadow outline of his magnificent wings. "This might be a good moment to mention that I also have a *dungeon*." He bared his teeth as well. "Perhaps you'll be more appreciative of your current lodging if I show you the alternative."

Threats, threats, and more threats. I'd about had it. "You *married* me," I shot back. "You agreed to this farce, you took a vow to be my husband, and now you'll just shove me aside? You've known about this contract for twelve years, and this is the best you can do? If you couldn't find a way out of this with all your demon powers—" I gestured wildly at him "—then maybe you should just suck it up and actually play your part and allow me a *life* instead of isolated captivity!"

His skin was aflame. As if underneath, his blood was lava, the surface cracked in some places and revealed a molten core of white-hot rage. My eyes widened involuntarily, my pulse stuttering. I'd have taken a step back—finally—if my muscles hadn't been locked in some kind of fear-induced paralysis.

"You," he snarled, his beautiful features contorted in fury, turning him into a vision of angelic vengeance, "are the one who ruined this."

Was it suicidal that overlaying the terror pounding through my blood was the insane urge to reach

out and touch his lips? Taste his skin again? I might burn myself, but I suddenly had a complete and utter understanding of the moth that gleefully dove into crackling flame.

Absent-mindedly, I licked my lips. His eyes dropped to my mouth. His nostrils flared, the cracks in his skin burning brighter.

“You had plenty of opportunity to avoid this mess,” he said, his voice reminiscent of the dark smoke forming his shadow wings. “And I certainly gave you enough chances to do so. You could have married any of the men who pursued you, and if you’d stayed married until past your 25th birthday, the contract would have been null and void.”

Like a bucket of ice water, his words shocked me out of the weird mix of fear and lust. My thoughts stumbled over each other, my brain drawing the connections faster than I could keep up.

Six proposals. That was the tally I’d racked up. At the tender age of twenty-five, when most women were maybe getting close to receiving their first proposal of marriage—if any at all—I’d had six of my former boyfriends ask me to marry them over the years.

It had started with the first guy I’d dated seriously at seventeen. At just a year older than me, he was heading off to college when we’d been together for six months, and he popped the question before he left.

Needless to say, that was the end of that relationship.

The next guy I went out with, once I was in college myself, asked me after four months of dating. I ran as if my ass were on fire.

After that, the proposals came even faster. The last man I dared to go out with, just a few months ago, went down on one knee and presented me with a ring on our third date. The result was me having a panic attack and him desperately waving at me as I sped away in the ride I called.

If there was one thing that made me run for the hills in a relationship, it was the prospect of marriage.

Dumbfounded, I stared at the smoldering demon in front of me. “That was you, wasn’t it?” I whispered. “You forced them to propose.”

“Force.” He scoffed and curled his lip. “Demons can’t *make* humans do their bidding. All I did was put a suggestion in their minds, and they did the rest.”

“You manipulated them!”

My head roared with the rush of blood. All this time, I’d thought my exes were crazy, infatuated, obsessed, I’d thought there was something wrong with me for attracting creeps who were obnoxiously clingy. And all this time, they’d been perfectly fine until a demon messed with their minds—because of me.

“Damn right I did.” He glowered at me. “And if you’d just taken one of them up on the offer, we wouldn’t be in this predicament, *would we?*”

Oh, so it was all my fault? Hell fucking no. “You could have just told me! Why didn’t you come to remind me of the contract sooner? If I’d known I needed to get married, I’d have gotten hitched all right!”

I would have annulled that sucker right after turning twenty-five, of course. No way I’d have *stayed* married. I suppressed a shudder.

“I wasn’t allowed to interfere with your decision,” the demon snapped, his teeth gleaming in the flickering light of the torches. Was I hallucinating, or had his canines sharpened?

“Oh, but you could manipulate everyone around me?”

“Only the subject of the covenant is off limits.”

The *covenant*. That fucking, arcane, life-destroying pact whose exact contents still eluded me.

Frustration built inside me until I wanted to scream. "What else does it say?"

He tilted his head. "You really don't know."

"No!"

For a moment, he stared at me with an expression I hadn't yet seen on him, like I was a particularly interesting species of insect that he wanted to dissect with thorough, scientific focus. Then one corner of his mouth tipped up, a sly gleam in his eye.

"That must be vexing," he drawled.

Bastard. He wasn't going to tell me, was he? Well, I could shoot right the fuck back.

"You know," I said, putting my hands on my hips, "you might have tried to manipulate your way out of the contract, but all you did was ensure that we'd end up here."

He narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"I *hate* the idea of marriage." I leaned forward. "I have since I was fourteen. If you'd done your research on me, you'd know that. You'd know that springing random marriage proposals on me would make me abandon that relationship faster than your wings catch fire. By manipulating the men in my life to propose one after the other, you made sure I never had a long-term relationship with the potential to naturally change my mind and let me accept the idea of real commitment with strings attached." I gave him a smile that was all teeth. "*You* ruined this."

The look that flashed across his face would have been comical under different circumstances. For a second, a glorious second, real surprise flickered over his features, mingled with disbelief and bafflement. I had an inkling that his control rarely slipped, that he usually kept his true emotions on a tight leash and only showed a calculated version of himself, allowing rage and aggression out but suppressing anything else.

It would make sense for a demon raised in Hell, I guess.

So this little slip, this brief glimpse at a raw, untempered reaction, was a glimmer of victory in a war I hadn't realized I was waging. It gave me a weird kind of satisfaction.

His expression shuttered in the next instant, the cracks of fire in his skin closing up before my eyes. *How surreal to see cinematic special effects in real life*, my brain supplied helpfully.

"Enjoy eternity alone," he murmured as he stepped back, drawing the shadows into himself again.

He was at the door before I could shake myself out of my stupor.

"Wait!" I called out.

Too late.

The door fell shut behind him, and a horrible click sounded with the finality of a nail being driven into a coffin.

My breath hitched, and I rushed to the door. Pulled on it. To no avail. It didn't budge.

He'd locked me in.

I pounded on the metal. "Azazel!"

My answer was silence, the only sound that of my own labored breathing, the pulse in my head, and the crackling of the torches.

That motherfucking bastard.

I'd expected obvious torture, instruments of pain, the punishment of burning. I'd feared being flayed alive or chewed up by a hellhound, maybe being subjected to an endless rerun of the *Cats* movie.

I had never entertained the idea of being tortured with solitary confinement.

I was an introvert by nature, I did well with being alone, doing my own thing, enjoying the quiet.

But even the most reserved person needed some form of connection. Input beyond books and her

own thoughts.

I would wither away here, driven to insanity by the stifling silence of my separation, by the tricks my mind would start to play in an effort to find something to do. I had seen what happened to zoo animals whose exhibits were too small for their wild nature. Broken gazes, numbed instincts, mindless pacing within a tight space that defined their existence.

A poem I'd once read by Rainer Maria Rilke resurfaced from the depths of my memory, about a panther staring out through bars into a world he couldn't grasp anymore, his vision filled only with the limits of his own enclosure. Pacing in ever tighter circles, his mighty will paralyzed, any and all memories and impressions that make it through the fog in his mind find their death in his heart.

I remembered being moved to tears by the words, by the image they painted.

That same helplessness and despair now crawled through me, drawing the picture of my own future in the same forlorn strokes.

A dry sob wanted to claw its way out of my chest.

No.

I would not cry. Not for myself. I'd already shed tears for my mom, for the people I cared about and the loss they'd suffer with me gone, but I would not weep for my own future—because I would make sure it didn't resemble that of a panther crippled by captivity.

If that cantankerous douche of a demon thought he could just put me in storage here like a package and I would take it with wet eyes and a snuffle, he had another think coming.

I would find a way out of these rooms. I had literally all the time in the world—or Hell—to figure out how to slip out, and once I did, I would make it my newly eternal life's mission to be an unrelenting pain in my reluctant husband's ass. I would *not* be shoved aside and ignored. This was my life now, and while I never wanted this marriage, I would make sure the man—or demon, as it may be—who was my supposed life partner would give me the minimum of attention I deserved.

Anything was better than being neglected and forgotten like a gift you didn't appreciate but couldn't throw out.

But first—rest.

It wouldn't do to start plotting my escape in my current state. I needed to be sharp, and right now, I felt like that one time I'd gone on a study marathon the night before an important exam because I'd procrastinated for weeks and had to cram a semester's worth of learning into eight hours.

I'd made it and gotten an A, but I felt like roadkill afterwards. The kind that had marinated in the desert sun for a few days.

The events of tonight held enough excitement for an entire year, and I hadn't had a minute to catch my breath and relax. My eyes hurt, my lungs were parched, and my limbs dragged as if weighted down with lead.

I shuffled over to the bedroom, into the adjacent bathroom—which indeed featured a toilet, hallelujah—and rummaged around in the vanity. I found a set of toiletries, much to my surprise, and did the bare minimum of getting ready for bed.

As soon as I hit the mattress, the torches simmered down to a faint glow. *Neat*. Eyes heavy, I shimmied deeper into the pillows and blankets, sleep beckoning with a velvet touch.

Tomorrow, I'd start my prison break.

CHAPTER 4

I SLEPT LIKE THE DEAD. WHEN I FINALLY WOKE UP, IT WAS WITH AN OVERWHELMING SENSE OF confusion and foreboding, like a slimy knot of sludge wedged in the pit of my stomach.

Gasping, I sat up, squinted into the semi-darkness. My brain was still half-tangled in the strange, immersive, and desolate dream I'd had, the pictures and feelings lingering and mingling with the reality that greeted me.

I'm in Hell, and my demon husband just locked me away like some bothersome pet.

Oh, yeah, that.

The anger simmering on low flamed up again, infusing me with the energy to swing my legs over the edge of the mattress and hop out of bed. Time to get cracking.

I had no idea how long I'd slept, what time it was—did they even keep time down here?—but I felt rested despite the vague sensation of dread ticking underneath my skin. I'd dumped my bag on one of the armchairs in the bedroom the night before, and now I pulled out my phone.

12:16 pm.

At least in Pacific Time. Back in San Francisco, it was noon now, and I should have shown up to work hours ago. My boss had undoubtedly called me, and my mom...should have read my message by now.

I unlocked the phone and checked my calls and messages. Nothing.

Because the little bar at the top said, *No service*.

Of course not. Would have been too much to hope for this thing to work down here. At least it was on and hadn't blown up in an explosion of sparks. Yet.

The battery showed 54%. I swallowed. How long until it gave out? My finger hovered over the Photos app. I had hundreds of pictures in there, among them a few of my mom, several of me and Tay, a handful of other friends. Some videos too. These pics and recordings were the only link I had left to my old life, to the people I cared about and had to leave behind.

I could look at them now, swipe through them in an effort to make sure I remembered all the little details of their faces, remembered the moments when the photos were taken. Because at some point, I realized with a broken breath, I'd forget.

If it was true that I could visit Earth and see them again, this wouldn't happen that soon. But it depended on whether I was actually allowed to visit, and how often. In light of Demon Douche's insistence I stay in these rooms, and his menacing parting words, I had the sinking feeling his statement of "You can visit" had been more of the theoretical sort. The academic difference between "Can I...?" and "May I...?"

I'd had a teacher in high school who was determined to teach us the correct use. Anytime a

student raised their hand and asked, “Can I go to the bathroom?” Ms. Lawson would smile sweetly and say, “Of course.” When the student approached her desk and held out their hand for the hallway pass, she would sit back and raise her brow. “Why would I give you this pass? You haven’t actually asked me for it.” “But I did!” the student would protest. And she’d say, “No, you asked whether you were generally able to go to the bathroom, and while you are physically in the condition to do so, your question did not cover whether you are allowed to go.” So, grudgingly, the student would mutter, “May I go to the bathroom?” and Ms. Lawson would hand them the pass with a smile on her face.

Perplexingly, not many students liked her. I could hardly fathom why, as I was sure she was *super* fun at parties.

I stared at my phone in my hand, weighing whether I wanted to open the fresh wounds of losing the people closest to me by browsing the Photos app. My stomach rumbled and made the decision for me. I had to eat, and then there was mischief to plot, so drowning in feels would have to wait for later.

I set the phone to flight mode to save battery, put it back in my bag, and went to the bathroom to shower.

The decor was pretty modern compared to the more medieval feel of the other rooms—for which I was eternally grateful. The thought of having to use sanitary facilities from the Middle Ages made my skin crawl.

The walls and floor were tiled in a soothing combination of light earth tones, the vanity dark wood topped with a stone sink. Opposite the toilet was the shower, a large area enclosed by glass, with what looked like a rainforest shower head hanging from the ceiling. A shelf held an arrangement of toiletries, and there was even a little bank jutting out from the tiled wall to sit down or prop up a leg.

All right, Demon Douche got points for providing me with the nicest bathroom I’d ever had in my life. Not that it made locking me in solitary confinement okay.

I stripped off my underwear and stepped into the shower. When I picked up one of the shampoo bottles, I froze.

It was the exact same brand that I used. But not just that—it was the exact same bottle. I knew because the cap was half broken and one corner of the label was coming off, curling in a very particular pattern.

Heart racing, I picked up another bottle and examined it closely. This was the conditioner I used, and it was half empty, just like the one I’d had at home. Next I spotted my razor on the shelf, the blades looking exactly like I remembered them from my last use—with tiny shavings stuck between.

I whirled around, stepped out of the shower and opened the vanity. Instead of the generic set of toiletries from last night, I discovered all the products from my own bathroom at home, neatly sorted into the drawers and cupboards.

Son of a—

On a whim, I marched back into the bedroom and threw open the doors to the large armoire. It was filled with my clothes. I distinctly remembered I didn’t pack these. I didn’t pack anything, what with having to scramble out the window in the desperate attempt at outrunning a demon and a contract from Hell.

I peered into the living room. The rest of the stuff from my apartment—not much though it was, considering I’d moved a couple of times and hadn’t accumulated any knickknacks—was scattered across the tables and shelves.

Well, well, well. Looked like someone had gone back and scooped up my modest belongings and

brought them here. I wondered if that someone was my grudging groom himself or one of his underlings.

Didn't matter much, of course, because the point was that he'd made that decision. He'd offered that I pack my necessities, but I flouted that and ran instead. For what it was worth, he could have considered his offer forfeit. With the argument we'd had last night, he could have just let me stew here with whatever generic stuff he'd provided.

If he were petty, he would have.

And yet, he'd made sure I would have my stuff here, something familiar in Hell.

I didn't know what to make of that.

My eyes fell on the covered trays on the small dining table in the corner. Right. Food. The hole in my stomach definitely demanded to be filled—after I'd scrubbed myself clean.

As I walked back into the bedroom and glanced at the nightstand—which held the same candle I'd set on it in my apartment, something I hadn't noticed earlier—a thought struck me. A horrible thought. Downright mortifying.

Oh God. Please tell me he didn't—

I bolted over to the nightstand, pulled open the top drawer...and covered my mouth with one hand to stifle my squeak. There it was, lying all innocently atop a pack of Skittles and my assortment of chapsticks. A single girl's best friend, the battery-powered answer to the disappointment of today's dating scene, the reason I usually went to sleep with a smile on my face.

Said face promised to be tomato red by the rush of blood to my head and the heat in my cheeks.

Good Lord. He'd touched this. Or maybe one of his people did. I didn't know what was worse. He—they—must know what it was.

It wasn't that I was ashamed of my sexuality. I had needs—and wants—and I didn't hide them. But it was one thing to be fairly progressive and open about sex, and another thing completely to have your toys spotted—and touched—by virtual strangers.

Suddenly the prospect of never seeing him again didn't seem so bad.

I showered and got dressed with the burn of embarrassment still heating my skin, then wolfed down the breakfast—waffles with syrup, some fruit, orange juice.

And *coffee*. Lovely, invigorating, smelling-like-heaven coffee that promised me we'd achieve *all the things* together today. Beautiful liar.

Okay, Demon Dork got more points for providing the elixir of life, aka the magic bean juice.

Still didn't balance out his Mr. Rochester performance.

Thinking of which, I got up and examined the door again. Heavy-looking metal, sturdy frame, and there wasn't even a keyhole underneath the handle. At least not from this side. It truly looked like a prison door.

I cursed and crossed my arms, pondering. I couldn't fathom being able to move this door from this side without, say, explosives, or maybe a troll. The Wolf's Head from Lord of the Rings would do it. I tapped my lips.

Right now, my best bet would be to try and make a run for it when food was delivered. Depending on who was delivering it, I could maybe either skip past them or incapacitate them somehow.

Of course, that would mean he'd soon know I was out and about. The better option would be to sneak out when no one noticed, but that required either opening this door by myself, or maybe digging a tunnel out of here, neither of which seemed really feasible at this point.

The rooms didn't have windows either, so doing the old-fashioned knot-your-sheets-together wasn't possible. Crud.

All right, so the hard way it was.

I placed my hand on the plaque next to the door. It lit up for a second, then turned off again. Okay. Time to wait.

Not two minutes later, sounds from outside filtered through the door. I stepped back just enough to allow it to open, my heart thumping at a record pace.

The door swung inside, and a group of the little house demons filed into the room. Three of them immediately busied themselves with gathering the dishes from the breakfast, while two of them stood in front of me, hands on their hips and a scowl on their gnarly faces.

I took a deep breath, smiled at them—and dashed right past them through the open door. Skidding to a half stop, I pulled the heavy metal shut behind me before running on. Maybe closing the door would stall them for a few seconds, give me enough of a head start to get away.

The hallway outside loomed wide, the ceiling high above me shrouded in darkness...that seemed to move. I stumbled a bit while looking up there, disconcerted by the glimpses at writhing shapes in the gloom.

A commotion behind me. The sound of the door opening, little footfalls and surprisingly vicious snarls.

Keep running.

I was glad my sneakers had been among my things brought to the rooms. They certainly came in handy now when I sprinted over the stone floors.

Ahead of me, the hallway took a turn. Maybe I could find a niche to hide in until the demon underlings passed. I could explore at my leisure later, once I wasn't being chased anymore.

Something snagged at my ankles, jolting me to a stop. My upper body hurled forward with the momentum while my legs skidded back. I barely avoided a full face plant with my arms thrown out. They broke the fall, and something nearly broke inside them.

I yelped. Bolts of pain shot through my hands, wrists, and arms, reverberated in my shoulders and chest.

Fucking hell.

And then they were on me. Snarling, the demon underlings swarmed me like a pack of feral toddlers raiding my pockets for candy. Tiny hands grabbed me from all sides, turned me around. My arms still hurt like hell, but I flailed anyway, trying to dislodge them. I wanted to move my legs, found I couldn't. One look down confirmed some form of lasso thing held them together at the ankles.

Great. I'd been brought down by a group of miniature demon cowboys.

"Let me go," I growled.

They growled right back and grabbed me even tighter, the fiends.

Next thing I knew, they bound my wrists in front of my chest with the same rope that secured my legs.

"Hey!" I yelled.

With barely a grunt, they lifted me up. Held above their heads, I watched the hallway walls bounce by as they carried me back the way I'd come. No, no, no.

Seriously? I was going to be bested by this horde of grumpy goblins? Not even a full-grown demon like Azazel? I'd have accepted him throwing me over his shoulder to dump me back in the room, what with him being a scary-ass demon almost twice my size and all.

But this? How fucking humiliating.

"Oy!" someone called out.

Someone not *me*.

The gremlins stopped as one, and I almost bit my tongue from the abrupt halt.

“Now what do we have *here*?” a female voice purred from behind me.

I tried to crane my neck to see who was talking, but all I managed was to pull a muscle.

“Set her down.” The voice moved closer.

Unceremoniously, the goblin goons dumped me on the floor. Ouch. I’d barely avoided hitting my head.

The group of tiny gremlins shuffled back, bowing low, almost prostrating themselves. Okay, whoever had arrived was someone high-ranking like Azazel then.

The click-clack of heels on the stone stopped right next to me. Twisting my neck, I peered up...at the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Flawless golden cream skin, auburn hair tumbling about her shoulders in waves that seemed natural and artistically layered at the same time, not a strand out of place. Sensual, full lips, pert little nose, elegantly swung eyebrows, and those eyes...I’d seen that exact color before.

“Well, hell-o,” she crooned. “I *knew* he was hiding something.” She waved her hands, and the bonds around my wrists and ankles turned to ash. “Come on, darling, let’s get you up and *talking*.”

Leaning down, she offered me her hand. I stared at it for a second. There was no doubt she was a demon like Azazel. One who knew him. And walked freely in his house. Was it safe to chat with her?

Was it safe *not* to?

Biting my lip, I took her hand, and she pulled me up to standing completely on her own, with a move so smooth and easy, it spoke of leashed strength and power. Still holding on to my hand, she leaned in, sniffed at me.

“Hmm.” Her eyes roamed my face, dipped lower. “So fresh and *alive*. Gorgeous. What’s your name?”

“Z-zoe.”

She made a sound of delight. “How fitting. Now, Zoe dear, come, come, I want to hear *all* about how you got here.” She pulled me along the hallway toward the open door to my rooms, snapping her fingers at the tiny terribles. “Disperse.”

They scrambled to get out of her way.

“You see,” she said, leading me back into the room, “when I received the report from my gate master, I knew he was lying, so I poked him a bit, and wouldn’t you know, he suddenly had this interesting story about how my dear brother came back from Earth—with a *human*. He couldn’t tell me who—apparently Az was quite secretive—only that it looked like a woman, and that he forbade them to speak a word of it under threat of torture. Threatening *my* people, can you believe it?”

She tsked and sat me down on one of the sofas, settling in next to me and propping her head up in her hand, elbow on the backrest, luminous lightning gray eyes focused on me.

“To think he actually thought he could order my guys to keep this from *me*.” She flicked her hair over her shoulder. “The nerve.”

My mind had snagged on one detail she’d mentioned. “You—you’re Azazel’s sister?”

“Oh!” She slapped her hand over her chest. “Where are my manners? How rude of me not to introduce myself. I apologize ever so much, darling. Yes, I’m that big buffoon’s sister, Azmodea.”

She held out her hand again. Hesitatingly, I shook it, still processing this new piece of information. I had a sister-in-law. A *demon* sister-in-law.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I murmured, dumbfounded.

“Oh, the pleasure is *all* mine.” She turned my hand over and kissed the back of it, lingering there with her lips brushing the skin, her gaze on me warm and sensual.

Clearing my throat, I gingerly withdrew my hand.

“So,” Azmodea said without missing a beat, “what’s the story? How come Az brought you down here? You’re not a damned soul. You’re very much alive.” She perused me from head to toe, her eyes hooded. “*Very* much.” She licked her lips and focused on my face again. “So what’s the deal, love?”

I hesitated. How much should I tell her? What was I allowed to say? Given that Azazel had explicitly ordered those other demons not to inform his own sister of my coming here, it was a safe guess that he wanted to keep this whole thing under wraps. And I didn’t know exactly what kind of relationship the two had. Being family didn’t always mean you were close—my own family being a prime example of that. I had two half-sisters I’d never met, had no desire to meet...and now *would* never meet, it seemed.

And yet...what loyalty did I have to Azazel? He was my husband in name only, he’d made it clear he had no intention of living up to that title and he’d locked me in here fully accepting that it would break me to live alone for the rest of my likely eternal life. He knew I’d go mad, and he didn’t care.

So then, why should I?

I was willing to roll the dice.

Sitting up straighter, I said, “I’m Azazel’s wife.”

Azmodea blinked. “Come again?”

“We’re married.”

For a moment, she stared at me, eyes like quicksilver. Then her mouth twisted into a grin. “You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you? I like a good joke. Good for you for having a sense of humor. You’ll need it down here. So, tell me, why are you really here?”

“I’m his wife, and he brought me down here because the contract said we’d have to live together, but he can’t be on Earth, which means I had to come to Hell.”

Silence. I had the impression Azmodea wasn’t usually quiet for more than a few seconds, but now she eyed me with her mouth hanging open as if I’d struck her mute.

“What contract?” she finally asked.

So I told her. How I’d summoned Azazel when I was thirteen in what was supposed to have been a mock séance, unwittingly somehow activating a contract I didn’t understand and locking myself into a covenant with a surly demon, to be fulfilled twelve years later. How he’d appeared in my living room last night, how we ended up getting married in front of three drunk women, after which he took me down to Hell and basically put me in storage.

Azmodea had grown increasingly excited during my tale of woe, and was now bouncing on the sofa, her eyes sparkling.

“Oh,” she cooed and clapped her hands, “this is so *delicious*. This is the best. I can finally get him back for that hellhound he stole. He will *never* live this down.”

“Um...”

“You know, he’s always so high-and-mighty, so bloody serious, it’s atrocious, really. I’ve been trying to find something to needle him with for *ages*, but he’s so—” She wrung her hands in a motion reminiscent of squeezing someone’s neck.

Ha, I could relate to *that*!

“Now don’t get me wrong, darling, I love my brother, despite the fact his sense of interior design is stuck in the Dark Ages—” She glanced around the room with an expression of mild disgust “—but by Lucifer, he needs something to shake him up a bit. And him getting hitched to a human by mistake is just perfect. If I believed in those things, I’d say he’s reaping some wonderful karma right now.”

Her grin showed fangs.

My mind was still playing catch-up with all the new information bombarding me. Just the fact that Azazel had *family* was enough to send me spinning. Because that opened up a whole new level of Pandora's Box called "in-laws from Hell." Quite literally.

I cleared my throat. "So, um, who else is there?"

"Hm?"

"You're his sister, and I assume he has other family members too?"

Chances were I wouldn't get this information from Azazel himself—given that he'd told me in no uncertain terms he didn't plan on showing his face here again—so I might as well probe his conveniently present sister about my new relatives-by-marriage.

"Oh, you know." She waved her hand. "There's Daevi, our grandmother on our mother's side—she's the archdemon of this territory—and then there's Mammon, my son—you'll love him—and then, oh, just half a dozen uncles and aunts on both sides, with scores of cousins of all stages removed..."

I gulped. One of my favorite movies was *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, but I never thought I'd end up in my own—albeit demonic—version of it.

"Sounds like a large family," I squeaked.

"Eh." Azmodea shrugged one shoulder. "We're not very fertile by nature—nothing like humans—but we *are* immortal, which makes for very long lives unless someone kills us, and over thousands of years, there are a few kids bound to pop up."

I leaned forward, gobbling up all the info. I was going to milk this for all it was worth. Who knew when I'd next get a chance to gather some knowledge about demons?

"So you don't die of natural causes?"

"Nope. We don't get sick and we don't age past our prime."

"But you can be killed?"

"It takes a lot, though." She smirked. "Even in a fight with another demon—or angel—there are rarely casualties."

Good god, there were angels too. Well, of course. If demons and Hell existed, it was only logical their opposite wasn't a myth either. I was getting just a bit dizzy.

"How old are you?"

Azmodea blew out a breath. "Let me think..." At my undoubtedly baffled look, she added, "Well, it gets a *bit* hard to keep track after the first millennium..."

Good thing I was sitting already.

"I think it must be two...two and a half thousand by now?" She squinted in thought, her lips pursed. "You'd have to ask Az, he's always been better at remembering our birthday."

"You two share the same birthday?"

She laughed. "Well, yeah, that's how it usually is with twins."

"You're *twins*?"

"Not that you'd know it either by looks or personality." She rolled her eyes. "He used to boast with the fact he's three minutes older, but honestly, that just means he came out too early and left all the charm behind for *moi*." Pressing her hand on her chest, she batted her lashes at me.

"Obviously," I said, unable to hide my grin.

She clucked her tongue. "Oh, you're adorable. Look at you, with all that dark hair and—let me see your eyes—" Leaning closer, she took my chin in her hand and peered at my eyes. "—oh, that's a beautiful hazel right there. He's lucky, you know. Stumbling into this marriage may not have given him much choice, but you're exactly his type."

My cheeks heated.

“So, how was it?”

“What?”

“The sex,” she said, her tone making it clear I was a bit slow. “I’m surprised you could walk, to be honest. He’s known for being demanding, and even his demon lovers often spend the next day recovering. Given that you’re human, I’d have thought you’d be flattened on the bed.”

I choked on my own breath. Azmodea patted my back as I coughed, my eyes tearing up.

“Are you all right, darling?”

“Fine,” I croaked. “I’m fine.”

My burning face of course painted me a liar.

“Come now, don’t be embarrassed. Shame is a human invention. We don’t do that down here.”

I made an undignified sound in response.

Azmodea tilted her head, narrowed her eyes and sniffed the air. Gaze snapping back to me, she drawled, “Now wait...don’t tell me he hasn’t devoured you like a scrumptious buffet yet.”

I didn’t even want to know what shade of red my face was at this point.

“How curious,” she murmured. Then her eyes lit up. “Ah. You told him not to touch you, then?” She snapped her fingers. “That would do it. He’s not the sort to take what isn’t offered.”

“Uh, no. I didn’t... He didn’t...” I scratched at my neck. “He just dumped me here and left.”

“Oh.” Azmodea stared at me with her mouth rounded into a cute little O. “Well, never you worry,” she said after a second. “I’m sure it’s not because he doesn’t want you. I mean, you’re obviously a snack.” Her gaze caressed me from head to toe. “You’ll see, soon he’ll be bursting in here, ready to ravish you with all the pent-up passion of a demon suppressing his basic desires.”

The door flew open with a bang that rattled my bones. I almost jumped off the sofa. A dark shadow filled the doorway, a writhing mass of stygian smoke, solidifying before my eyes. The mist of power receded to reveal Azazel’s face, even more achingly beautiful for the fury refining his features. Eyes sparking lightning, he advanced into the room.

CHAPTER 5

“BROTHER!” AZMODEA CALLED, HER VOICE ALL CHIRPY.

She rose from the sofa and walked over to him. Unfazed by his one-second-away-from-murder expression, she went up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. I’d once seen a grumpy pit bull being loved on by a fearless kitten, and the effect was quite similar.

“Imagine my surprise,” Azmodea tweeted, “when I found out I had a *sister-in-law*.” She slapped him on the shoulder. “How dare you not tell me? To think, I allow you to use the gate in my territory, and you turn around and smuggle a human in without letting me know? And not just any human, but your *wife*? Why was I not invited to the wedding?”

“What,” he growled, “are you doing here?”

“Getting to know your lovely wife, of course.” She put her hands on her hips. “When were you going to introduce us?”

His expression clearly said *never*, and Azmodea narrowed her eyes.

“Now, I know you don’t like to share,” she said, “but this is ridiculous. You can’t keep her for yourself. She’s family now.”

If possible, that word infuriated him even more. “Leave,” he snarled.

He was awfully good at snarling and growling.

Azmodea clucked her tongue. “Are we in a mood today, oy.” Turning to me, she stage-whispered, “I’ll be back, darling.”

“No, you won’t.” Azazel glared at her.

“Sure, sure.” She waved him off, but winked at me and mouthed, “Yes.” Walking past him, she patted him on the shoulder. “I expect you at dinner tonight.”

Sauntering out of the room, she left me alone with a hunk of rage in demon form. I’d gotten up from the sofa and now stood there, skin tight, my heart racing.

Dark power murmuring about him, he went to the door with deliberate calm, placed his palm on it and pushed it shut from inside. The metallic clang of it closing reverberated in my core. His hand still on the door, he looked at me over his shoulder. Lightning fire flashed in his eyes, the brutally beautiful lines of his face hinting at leashed anger simmering just beneath the surface.

“What part,” he muttered, his voice silken violence, “of ‘you are not to leave these rooms’ did you not understand?”

I trembled. My hindbrain screamed at me to run and hide. To appease. To do something, anything, to defuse the threat in front of me. He’d been less scary when he was growling and snapping.

That gecko part of my brain, however, didn’t seem to be in control.

“I will not be caged here.” The words tumbled out past the knot in my throat. “These rooms

cannot be my whole world. I need more than this.” I gestured around me.

Gaze fixed on me, he prowled over, all lethal grace and banked power. He advanced with such predatory intent, I forgot to breathe until he was right in front of me. Involuntarily, I backed up—or tried to. My legs bumped into the sofa right behind me, and I went down, grabbing the cushions as my butt hit the seat.

Following me, he leaned in, put one hand on the backrest next to my head, the other on the cushion beside my hips, trapping me with the calm of a hunter fully in control of its prey.

“What you need—” his tone caressed my senses with velveteen menace “—is a lesson in humility.”

God help me, but the shiver coursing through me at his words was all thrill and no fear. Breath coming fast, I stared at his mouth just inches from my face. His power crackled between us, an invisible touch that was too much and not enough.

“I have to warn you,” I whispered. “I think I suffer from a selective learning disability.”

The tiniest twitch of his mouth, not quite a smile, but something shifted in his energy. “I have been kind with you. You’re provided with more than the contract specifies. By rights, I could have you hanging upside down from manacles in my dungeon. You think this is a cage?”

His power whispered over my skin, and I squirmed. Not in terror, mind you.

“I could lock you in with the hellhounds if you require a demonstration of what a real cage looks and feels like.”

“I’m more of a cat person,” I breathed.

This time, the smile was real, if fleeting. A second of amusement flashing through his countenance, followed by simmering focus.

“You have everything a human needs in here. These lodgings are larger than any place you’ve occupied in the last ten years, you have entertainment, exercise equipment, and comfort. I even brought you your belongings from Earth.” Molten heat in his gaze. “Including your tiny masturbation device.”

I closed my eyes, waves of mortification rolling through me. It had been him, not one of his underlings. Unfairly, the sofa didn’t open up and swallow me.

Deflect. I had to change the subject before I was too embarrassed to say anything at all.

“I don’t know where you get your info on humans,” I ventured, my voice just a bit wobbly, “but we need more than all this to really live. We’re social by nature. We need human contact.” I met his eyes briefly, couldn’t hold his intense gaze for longer than a second, and settled on his nose instead. “Or, demon contact, as it were.”

The air between us hummed with power. His nostrils flared.

“Azmodea,” he said into the charged silence, “will suffice.”

I bristled even as I cheered for that bit of concession from him. It was telling that he’d rather send his sister to talk to me than deal with me himself. I was a burden he wanted nothing to do with, an obligation he’d as soon acknowledge as chew off his own arm. An old hurt inside me broke open, leaking bitterness like acid into my veins.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. “She will not.”

His eye twitched. “What more do you want? Considering your position, you should be content with my generous offer.”

Generous offer my ass. He just wanted to shove me off on someone else. And as much as I liked Azmodea and would indeed enjoy her company, the thought that he could simply keep ignoring me pricked me the wrong way. What I wanted—as irrational as it was, given I’d sworn never to depend

on a guy—was to have *him* check on me. Not because I needed him, but because it was his goddamn duty as my husband, and fuck him if he wanted to run from that.

“You’re not generous,” I said, “you’re a coward.”

A sheen of bright silver rolled over his eyes, luminous like a cat’s tapetum lucidum when hit by light in the dark. The faint smell of something burning drifted through the air.

“Am I now?” His voice was deceptively calm, belied only by the intensity with which he regarded me.

In for a penny, in for a pound. Too late to backpedal now. “You’re afraid to deal with me yourself,” I pressed on, ignoring the knot of unease building in my chest. “You’d rather hide and avoid me than face me and truly fulfill the contract. I think it’s because you’re afraid you can’t do it. You don’t know the first thing about really taking care of someone, do you? You’re scared you won’t measure up, so you won’t even try. Instead you run like a chicken.”

My heart skipped a beat. A tiny voice of reason inside me wailed in dismay. I did not just accuse my powerful and temperamental demon husband of being a *chicken*.

I dared meet his eyes and cringed inwardly. Oh, yes. Yes, I did.

The scent of something smoldering grew stronger. His power drenched the air, pressed against my skin and made it hard to breathe.

Maybe this was it. Maybe this time I’d pushed him too far, and he’d roast me over the fire now. I must have a hidden masochistic streak, some sort of near-death wish.

“Goading me?” he asked after a tense moment. “How cute.”

I chanced a glance at his expression. The hint of a smirk played about his mouth, his eyes glinting with the wrong kind of amusement.

“You should know it won’t work,” he said. “If I let myself be provoked into impulsive action by any artlessly delivered insult, I wouldn’t have survived a day at Lucifer’s court.”

He brushed his thumb over my cheek, down to my mouth, prickles of heat trailing behind.

“But if you crave my company so badly,” he murmured, his voice pleasure dipped in sin, “you could always try begging. I might just relent and come play with you.”

That. Pompous. Ass.

Fire roared through me, my vision turning red. I would *never* beg for even a scrap of his attention. “Don’t flatter yourself,” I snapped and pushed his hand away from my face. “Given the choice between you and a talking toilet, I’d happily chat up that porcelain throne.”

“That can be arranged.” One side of his mouth curved up. “If I’d known your special preferences regarding to water closets, I’d have installed a Japanese toilet already.”

I bared my teeth in a snarl, giving in to the feral creature inside me.

His gaze dipped to my lips and his hooded eyes flared with heat. He leaned in until only an inch remained between us, filled with rage and the sensual dare of a challenge I felt deep inside me like an echo of my thundering heartbeat.

Just a tiny movement forward, and my mouth would brush his. Our noses were so close, his breath caressed my lips as if teasing with his touch. Molten desire curled in my core, my body straining to close the distance, feel his heat.

“Ask me,” he whispered, his words sweet poison for my mind, his nearness a magnetic lure for my senses.

I blinked, breath heavy, struggling to disentangle my brain from the vortex of lust threatening to draw me under. “All right,” I breathed.

Triumph in those eyes of quicksilver lightning.

“Will you,” I murmured, my voice thick with longing, “get me that toilet?”

His face fell, and it was the juiciest, most pleasurable thing to witness, almost as satisfying as an orgasm from my trusted electric friend.

It only lasted a few seconds, but I could learn to live for those moments when I made him lose his composure.

He let go of the sofa, straightened, and stared down at me. Back was the calm, controlled expression, the slightly cruel glint in his eyes. His game face, as I thought of it.

I schooled my own features to show none of the irrational disappointment at his retreat.

“Far be it from me,” he said, his voice light and mocking, “to deny you the sanitary equipment of your dreams. I’ll have the toilet installed promptly. Anything else, honey?”

I recognized his deliberate use of the endearment for the taunt it was...still it smarted. It only drove home the fact I’d never again have a romantic partner in my life who’d say it with the right intent.

Sure, I had commitment issues and a spade of bad luck in dating—thanks to Tall, Dark, and Chokable here—and I’d never seen myself in a long-term relationship. But that didn’t mean I didn’t crave a little bit of affection every now and then. I was only human, after all.

With my life as it was now, though, there’d be none of that coming my way in the near or distant future. Not if my cantankerous husband had his way. He sure as fuck wouldn’t show me a sliver of authentic affection, and with me locked in these rooms, I’d likely never meet anyone else with whom I’d share romantic feelings.

I was staring down a future of real, frightening loneliness, and it took all I had not to reveal how much that scared me. I’d rather claw myself bloody than let him see me brittle and afraid. He wasn’t the only one with a game face for this farce.

“Actually,” I said, tilting my head to look up at him, “there is something, yes.”

I hated sitting down while he was standing over me. Body language could be used for subtle wars, and right now, ours said I was a bug he would have squashed...if I weren’t so insignificant in the first place.

But he still stood so close that I couldn’t just get up—I’d have to scramble around him or stand on the sofa, and both of these moves would be so obvious in their intention that it would render them a moot point.

I refused to cross my arms or legs either, knowing full well it would signal my discomfort even more.

So I simply fixed him with a stare I hoped appeared forged from steel, forcing my body into a deliberately relaxed position. “I want to visit Earth.”

He chuckled. *Chuckled*, the ass. “Of course you do.”

I barely controlled the twitch of my facial muscles. “You said I could see my friends and family. Well, I want to visit Taylor and my mom.”

His smile was all kindness, his tone gentle...his answer a slice across my heart. “No.”

“You promised,” I hissed.

“I didn’t, actually.” The smug expression he sported made my hands curl to fists. “I said you *could* see them, not that you would. Semantics are important, dear. If you’d included visits to Earth in your negotiation before we got married, I’d be beholden to fulfill that condition. As it is—” he adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves “—I have no obligation to take you to Earth.”

I inhaled sharply, my composure slipping in the face of his casual cruelty. My oath to never let him see me crumble was all good and well, an admirable effort to keep the scales from tipping too far

in his favor. There was only one problem—I was an angry crier.

Rile me up enough, and tears would stream down my cheeks while I shook with fury. A lot of people—most often men—would mistake that reaction for a display of weakness, an overly emotional response revealing the supposed fragility of my feminine nature. Which would only make me cry harder with frustration.

Now, despite my best intentions, tears filled my eyes as I stared at the demon prick who refused to grant me the simple kindness of seeing my loved ones, the lone sliver of light in the gloom of solitary confinement he intended for me.

“You can’t do this,” I rasped, my throat tight. “You can’t be this unfair.”

“Unfair?” His eye twitched. Or at least I thought it did. Kind of hard to see through the blur of tears. “You dare speak of unfairness when you’re the one who tricked me into this contract?”

“*I didn’t fucking trick you into anything!*” I yelled, shooting up from my seated position, all consideration of body language thrown out the non-existent window, along with my equilibrium.

My move had apparently caught him off-guard—he drew back just enough that I had room to stand right in front of him. For a split second, I wondered how I must appear to him...a spitting mad kitten hissing at a tiger poised for a pounce?

“And yes, you’re being unfair,” I continued, my voice breaking. Damn that angry crying! My breath caught in my chest, too much like a sob for my liking. “You act like you’re so inconvenienced by this covenant, yet nothing actually changed for you, did it? You get to live your life just like before, especially since you’re going to just dump me here and never look back.” More tears spilled over, hot and infuriating on my cheeks. My voice sounded awfully like a wail. “I’m the one whose life is uprooted. I lost my home, my world, my family, my friends. Everything and everyone I’ve ever known. And now you won’t even allow me a simple *visit*.”

His jaw tightened, as far as I could tell with my compromised vision. “Quit that.” His voice was a low snarl.

I cringed when he reached out, his hand going for my face. On instinct, I wanted to jerk back, but he caught my chin with his fingers, held me there. With his other hand, he wiped the tears from my cheeks, his gentle touch at odds with his harsh expression.

“Quit that,” he repeated more quietly.

“I *can’t*.” I sob-gasped for air. “You make me so *angry*.”

“Angry.” He stilled, his gaze disconcertingly thoughtful.

“Yes,” I hissed.

His hands still lingered on my face, and the slight pressure of his fingers on my chin, the heat of his palm on my cheek messed with my focus.

“I’m an angry crier. It may look like I’m a miserable pile of sobbing sadness, but I’m actually contemplating how best to eviscerate you.”

His smile startled the fuck out of me. Brilliant, blinding, it lit up his face all the way up to and including his eyes, transforming the brutal beauty of his features into something ethereal, enthralling, a vision of grace tempered with sin.

“A fillet knife would do.” Sparks of lightning in his eyes, his expression distinctly delighted. “But make sure it’s forged in Hell.”

“Noted.” I swallowed, trying to think past the feel of his fingers on my skin.

“As for your visits,” he said, brushing his thumb over my lower lip, distracting me more than I liked to admit, “they’re not *simple*. Those trips would cost me, and I am not spending valuable resources on your sentimental whims.”

I clenched my jaw tight and stepped away from him, away from his touch. Ignoring the latest sting of his words, I focused on the new information I could glean. “What do you mean?”

“Both your mother and your friend live in areas too far from Azmodea’s gate. To get there and back in a reasonable time, I’d have to use gates in other territories.” His features darkened. “And nothing in Hell is free except the illusion of kindness.”

“You’d have to pay to use the gates? With what?”

“Souls.”

I reared back. “They’re your currency?”

“That, or favors. The latter of which—” he raised a brow “—are the riskier to give.”

How barbaric. How disgusting. How— I shook my head, covering my mouth with my hand. Nausea swirled in my stomach.

“So you see,” he said, a dark undertone in his velvety voice. “A *simple visit* would cost me precious assets, more than setting you up here did. You think my life hasn’t changed, that your presence here is of no consequence? You could cost me—”

He broke off, his lips firming into a thin line, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“What?” I narrowed my eyes. “I could cost you what?”

“My last nerve,” he muttered after a moment, sinister amusement curving his mouth.

Cop-out. I was about to needle him further when the tapestry behind me caught fire in a wave of sparks.

I shrieked, wanted to jump away—and froze when a huge splash of slimy, clear liquid hit the burning tapestry...and me along with it.

Gasping, I looked up at the ceiling, at the source of the unexpected slime projectile. There, retreating into the shadows between the rafters, hung an animal that looked like a cross between a bat and a cat. It yawned, showing a row of sharp teeth, and licked the spare drops of spittle from its maw.

“What the fu—” I whirled around to Azazel, cat-bat saliva dripping from my face, my hair, my fingers.

His smirk was even worse than the spit currently making its way down my neckline and between my breasts. “I told you it’s manageable.”

“The—I—this—” I sputtered and flailed, spraying drops of slobber all around me. “What the hell is this?” I pointed wildly at the ceiling. “How long has it been there?” My voice rose to a squeak. “What does it eat?”

Lines formed around his mouth, the skin on the corners of his eyes tightening. Was that jerk trying not to laugh?

He held up a finger. “A hellcat.” He added a second finger. “Since before you arrived.” Three fingers now. “Vermin.”

I waved my arms around. “And it spits on whatever spontaneously combusts in your house?”

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

“That’s revolting!”

“Oh, I don’t know.” His gaze dropped to my chest, where my drenched T-shirt now shamelessly hugged my breasts, emphasizing my peaked nipples underneath my equally wet bra.

I crossed my arms. “I’d prefer a sprinkler system.”

“So I’d forego the joys of seeing you covered in hellcat saliva?” He clucked his tongue. “Come now. Anything else I can get you, my love?”

I flashed my teeth. “Your head on a plate.”

“I thought you were vegetarian.” He walked backwards toward the door, his eyes dancing with

mirth. "So bloodthirsty."

And before I could throw a cushion after him, he was gone, the door once more shut and locked.

CHAPTER 6

AFTER HE LEFT, I WENT STRAIGHT TO THE SHOWER, PEELED MYSELF OUT OF THE SPIT-SOAKED CLOTHES, and scrubbed myself clean. It took an hour of repeated hair washes to remove any residue of hellcat saliva, and when I finally stepped out of the shower, my skin glowed rosy with how much I'd rubbed soap all over me.

I dressed in a new pair of jeans and a tank top, mindful of the ever-present heat of Hell. When I walked back into the living room, I eyed the gloom-shrouded rafters in the ceiling with caution.

Somewhere up there, Sir Spit A Lot lurked, waiting in the shadows to either devour some vermin—and good Lord, I didn't even want to know what Hell's definition of vermin actually was—or douse a spontaneous fire with his spittle. As I stared, the shadows shifted, claws scratched on stone, and a long, black tail swished down to dangle lazily from a rafter.

I shuddered.

I didn't count as vermin, right? Azazel wouldn't allow this thing here if it might feel inclined to gnaw on my limbs while I was sleeping.

I hoped.

My gaze fell on the burned tapestry, and I stopped short. It was gone, in its place a new one. The area appeared freshly cleaned, no sign of either the spontaneous combustion from earlier or the saliva fire extinguisher residue.

Someone must have come by and taken care of it while I was in the shower.

I examined the door again, still didn't find a weakness to exploit, and went on to explore the rest of the rooms more thoroughly than before. To my surprise, the second room now featured my gym bag in addition to the treadmill, and my yoga mat and accessories were propped against the wall.

Exercise equipment, indeed.

Azazel's words replayed in my mind, and with a new flash of embarrassment I remembered what else he'd brought here.

Face hot and pulse racing, I tried my damndest to direct my thoughts toward the jerktastic things he'd said—better to be angry than...well, let's not even go there—but all I could picture was my vibrator in his large hands. How he held it, looked at it, knowing exactly what I'd used it for. Ugh. I did not want to imagine that. Did. Not.

Desperate for a distraction, I turned to the treadmill. How did this even work? I hadn't seen any electric outlets in the walls anywhere here. This thing wouldn't run on its own.

On closer inspection, I did find an outlet where the power cord of the treadmill was plugged into. Although it looked...well, precarious would have been an understatement. It appeared entirely, amateurishly self-made, a thing from the earliest days of electrical discovery, straight from the chaotic

workshop of a reclusive 19th-century engineer who'd never heard of "safety first." I suspected I might get an electric shock just by looking at it.

I cleared my throat and backed away from the treadmill. Hey, at least if this thing caught fire, there was a trusty hellcat to spit it out.

I did some yoga, browsed the books in the living room—a few of my own, brought here along with my stuff, in addition to a broad selection of world literature and a handful of genre books related to my reading tastes—had lunch, again delivered by the grumpy goblins, though they kept a closer eye on me now, and by the time "evening" rolled around—noticeable only by the timing of dinner—I was bored stiff out of my mind.

Even as introverted as I was, I'd grown up with an always accessible connection to the wider world in the form of my phone and the various social media and chat apps on it. And like many others of my generation, with the wealth of information on the internet and access to my friends just a swipe and a click away, I never felt truly alone. Among the people I knew, there would always be someone online, available to chat, or someone would have posted new content for me to respond to.

The only time I'd really felt cut off from this constant source of information and connection was when I'd gone camping with my mom once in my later teens. There'd been no Wi-Fi—obviously—and the signal had been so weak and spotty that I couldn't really connect to the internet during the whole week. True to my status as a technology-spoiled teen, I'd whined about it every day.

But at least I'd had my mom then. Someone I loved who was there, keeping me company, sharing this experience with me. In hindsight, it'd been a wonderful time with her, one of the few vacations we could afford. My dad paid his child support all right—still, money was tight after the divorce.

When I was younger, my mom stayed home with me, giving up her job to take care of me until I entered school, and even then she only applied for a part-time position so that she'd be there for me in the afternoon. That was possible because of my dad's income, a luxury not many families could afford in those days.

What little she earned with that job, however, was barely enough to provide for us both after the divorce, and she struggled to find a full-time position in her field for quite some time. The job market isn't kind to mothers who stayed home or cut back on their hours for their kids for more than ten years.

So even with my dad's alimony, Mom and I struggled for those first few years after our family broke apart. And I could just hear my mom's voice, bitter and insistent, drilling into me to never depend on a man, to always make sure I stood on my own two feet and be independently financially stable.

"As long as you have your own job that pays your own way," she would say, the lines around her mouth deepening with bitter regret, "you can always walk away unscathed. Your life is still yours. If everything comes crashing down, you'll still be standing." She'd pause then, her gaze turning inward, her voice growing quiet. "You won't be buried under the rubble."

Now, as I sat there in the medieval living room in my quarters in Hell and surveyed what was left of my once independent life, the memory of my mom's warning clogged my throat. What would she say if she knew? Despite her trying so hard to secure a better future for me, I'd ended up in an even worse position than she was ever in with my dad.

My life was literally in the hands of the man—demon—I married, and he had full control over every aspect of it. I couldn't even move freely.

My fate had come full circle to not just repeat the mistakes my mom made, but increase them by multiples.

And I knew, without a doubt, that Mom would weep for me.

That did it. The fury and despair scratching at my throat, tightening my chest, erupted in a scream as I grabbed the remains of my dinner and hurled the plates at the mockingly closed door. Pulse thundering in my body, breath heavy, I stared at the streak of sauce and spaghetti making its way down toward the floor.

Useless, I knew. To smash random things in uncontrollable wrath. But sometimes, when your voice wasn't heard, when your needs were ignored, all you had left was the urge to break something.

Claws scratching on stone, the flap of wings, a shadow descending from above. I jumped back as the hellcat landed on the floor in a whirl of black, bat-like wings and sniffed at the remnants of my dinner decorating the door. Its dark gray tongue darted out and lapped up the food.

I held my breath. I'd only seen parts of it before, half-concealed in the gloom of the ceiling, glimpses at a thing that shouldn't exist, that my mind couldn't make sense of. Now, it crouched in the full glow of the torches, the flickering firelight dancing over its smooth black pelt that covered its entire body except the wings. Those were of the same membranous, dark skin as one would see in bats, but instead of being a mutated form of its front legs, the wings were extra appendages growing out of the shoulder blades.

The hellcat's real front legs were in the normal, natural position of all felines, lithe and muscled, the paws tipped with claws that were now retracted. Its ears were larger than a normal cat's, more like a serval's. Overall, it was the size of a lynx maybe, definitely bigger than your average house cat.

If there were to be a perfect mix of a cat and a bat, taking the best parts of each and smashing them together for the most amazing crossover in the animal kingdom, this would be it.

I must have made an appreciative sound, because one large ear swiveled toward me while the hellcat kept on lapping up my leftovers. Once done, it sat up, licking its maw and cleaning its face with its paw in the universal cat way of post-meal grooming.

I stood rooted to the spot, fascinated by this creature that topped off all the out-of-this-world things I'd seen and heard over the past twenty-four hours. Even when the beautiful beast turned its elegant head, its luminous yellow eyes focusing on me with faint feline interest, I was riveted, unable to move.

"You are so pretty," I whispered.

A slow blink from those mesmerizing eyes. *I know*, a voice murmured in my head, and with a flap of its wings, the hellcat soared up to the ceiling again, vanishing in the dark.

Eyes wide, I stared after it, my mouth hanging open. "Can you talk?"

Silence greeted my squeaked question.

Had I hallucinated that? Was I losing it already? I'd barely been a full day in Hell...reality couldn't be slipping away from me that fast, could it?

Symptomatic of my new normal, there was no one here to confirm or refute.



I DIDN'T SEE AZAZEL AGAIN FOR ALMOST TWO WEEKS. IN FACT, I DIDN'T SEE ANYONE EXCEPT THE gremlin demons for several days in a row, bringing me meals, cleaning, and—to my utter irritation—installing that damned Japanese toilet. Occasionally, I'd catch glimpses of the hellcat, but that was it.

The isolation started wearing on me. I'd never been this alone. To make matters worse, my phone's battery gave up on day two, despite the flight mode and me only picking it up once to swipe

through the pictures. I deliberately looked at the photos for an hour, knowing the angry red of the battery sign meant this was my last chance to see my loved ones...not just in pictures, but ever, if Azazel insisted on being a cruel prick.

I dared play a video, drawing more from the battery, but I needed to hear my mom's voice. My vision blurred, my eyes filling with hot tears, my chest tight and hurting. When the screen abruptly turned black, the phone finally dead, I curled up into a ball and wept for hours.

On day ten-or-something, I started talking back to the Japanese toilet. Sadly, it wasn't much of a conversationalist. In a fit of spite, I asked the gremlins to bring me a sharpie, which I then used to write Azazel's name on the damned toilet. Was it petty and childish? Yes. Did it give me the grim satisfaction of defecating on his namesake? Also yes.

What could I say? Isolation did quite a number on me.

Suffice it to say, when Azmodea came to visit, I was so grateful to see her—see *anyone*—I'd have kissed her feet.

"Darling!" she tweeted as she swept into the room, all glamour and glitz in a dress that could have been snatched from a movie set of the 40s. Taking my face in her hands, she kissed me on both cheeks and peered at me with drawn brows. "Oh, you look dreadful. Has he been starving you?"

"Of attention," I muttered, unable to keep my tongue in check.

She tsked. "He's been in a *mood* lately, let me tell you. So much brooding, randomly snapping at his people. You know, like a human on a particularly prohibitive diet, denying themselves what their body needs the most." She casually waved her hand in the air. "Not a very apt comparison, since we don't need food, but—" Staring at me, she pursed her lips. "Hm."

"What?"

She rolled her eyes. "He's a right stubborn git, is what he is. Never you mind, I'll talk to him." Her voice a murmur, she added, "I seriously don't know why he prefers to suffer."

Him, suffer? How ridiculous. Before I could even laugh at that idea, though, someone else spoke up.

"Um, because he's Azazel, patron saint of stuck-up control freaks?" a male voice said from behind Azmodea.

I hadn't even noticed anyone else being in the room—Azmodea had a way of monopolizing my attention, glittering like a jewel in the spotlight. Now I peered around her to the man—demon?—who'd spoken.

His dark eyes, framed by thick black lashes, sparked with humor, mirrored in the wry grin curving his full lips. His skin a smooth brown tan, a short beard dusting his strong jaw, he held himself with natural confidence. The torchlight reflected on his long black hair, loosely bound at his nape.

Stunning. That was the word echoing in my brain as I stared at him. If I'd passed him on the street, I'd have done a double-take and turned to ogle him some more. He was the type of man who'd arrest your attention, not just by the refined beauty of his features, but by his poise, by the way his smile seemed like a beacon drawing your eyes.

"Ah yes," Azmodea said, "let me introduce you. This is my son, Mammon. Mammon, meet your uncle's *secret* wife."

That word stung unexpectedly. Or maybe not so unexpectedly? In light of how my father had an entire *secret family*, was it any wonder I'd react with intrinsic bitterness to that concept?

"Enchanté," Mammon murmured with a glint in his eye, taking my hand and placing a kiss on the back of it.

I cleared my throat. "Nice to meet you."

Azmodea clapped her hands together. “Splendid! Isn’t it just swell to get to know more of the family? I figured you’d love to see some other faces than that of my dear brother—I just wasn’t sure if you were free, you know. I assumed he was keeping you busy rolling around that big bed, but then I found out he’s been throwing himself into work lately and roaming about, and I just knew I had to sneak by.” She swung herself onto the sofa. “Let’s sit, dear. We were so rudely interrupted last time, but there’s still so much to talk about.”

I sat next to her, with Mammon perching on the armrest of the chair opposite us.

“Is it true,” he said, crossing his legs, his hands clasped over his knee, “that you tricked him into a marriage contract?”

Good God, would I ever live that down?

“No.” I gritted my teeth. “I mean, I don’t know. I had no clue what I was doing. Honestly, it was just a desperate teenage séance gone wrong. Okay, sure, my friend and I were kind of naively hung up on this idea that we had to be married by the age of twenty-five, or else we’d shrivel into undesirable wallflowers and would die alone—I know, I know—” I held up my hands “Too many historical romances, not enough frontal cortex developed yet, but hey, no one ever claimed young teenagers have a good grasp of impact and consequences. There’s a reason the age of majority is set years after those hormones screw us up...”

Mammon cast a glance at Azmodea. “This is even better than I thought.”

She nodded. “I know.”

His smile was incandescent. “No wonder he’s been so grouchy.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t think anyone else has ever gotten him like that.”

Azmodea raised a brow. “Sure hasn’t.”

“How long do you think we can bring this up at family dinners?”

She tilted her head, eyes narrowed. “Oh, at least the next hundred years.”

“He’ll be so *peeved*,” Mammon said, his voice dreamy, eyes sparkling with delight.

Azmodea nodded sagely. “Even more than when you sent him those hellbats.”

Mammon snickered. “How long did it take him to wash the guano off—three hours?” He turned to me, one hand over his heart. “You,” he declared solemnly, “are my new favorite being. This gift you’ve given us is—” he kissed the tips of his fingers “—priceless.”

“Gift?” I repeated hollowly.

“Why, yes.” He beamed. “You see, my uncle has this impenetrable wall of control around him, a perfect facade of strength and invulnerability, like he can do no wrong, has no faults, not a single chink in his armor. He’s been unbearable with his goody-two-shoes haughtiness for far too long.”

“Far too long,” Azmodea echoed, shaking her head.

“You managed to take him down a peg, without even trying.” Mammon grinned. “And now we have all this ammunition against him...”

“Well,” I said, clearing my throat, bitterness churning in my stomach, “I’m sure glad to be of service to your personal family feud, at the expense of my freedom and sanity.”

Mammon tilted his head in question.

“What you consider a *gift*,” I elaborated, “is a life sentence of isolation for me.” I waved my hands at the room. “According to my absentee husband, this is all I need to live for...I don’t know, what’s my life expectancy now? Do I live as long as you guys?”

Mammon and Azmodea exchanged a glance.

“Do you think it’ll be like...?” he asked quietly.

She shrugged. “Possibly. It’s similar enough to be a precedent.”

“What is?” I leaned forward.

Azmodea hesitated. “There’s...one other case of a human bonded to a demon and living in Hell.”

“It’s not a marriage, though,” Mammon chimed in.

“No, it kind of predates that entire concept.” She grimaced. “A weird human custom, if you ask me. Based on the idea of ensuring patrilineal bloodlines...”

“Well, it’s not like humans can sniff out kinship.” Mammon scratched his chin.

She raised an elegant auburn brow. “They wouldn’t have to if they went by matrilineality.”

“Not to interrupt this fascinating discussion of anthropology,” I said, holding up a finger, “but about that other human living in Hell...”

“Oh, yeah.” Azmodea snapped her fingers. “She’s been here since the beginning, hasn’t aged a day, so in her case, the bond altered her mortality. Chances are you’re changed as well, but only time will tell, I guess.”

“Right.” I blew out a breath. “So I’m possibly looking at an eternity of...this.” Leaning back, I glanced around the room. “However much my unwitting trickery delights you, I inadvertently screwed myself over too.”

“Now, now.” Azmodea patted my hand. “I’ll talk to him, darling. He’ll come around, eventually.”

And how much time would pass until then? What would be left of my sanity?

Mammon regarded me with a thoughtful expression while Azmodea went on to ask me about my life, answering my questions about Hell and demons. I soaked up the information, basked in their company, not knowing when I’d see them next.

When they got up to leave, I refrained from begging. Barely.

Azmodea kissed me on my cheeks again and sailed out the door in a swirl of fiery hair and glittering fabric, but Mammon lingered behind.

“You know,” he said, leaning against the door jamb, “there is a way out of these rooms besides this door here. My mother prefers the diplomatic tactic of trying to talk to Azazel—” he rolled his eyes “—but I’m a fan of sneakier methods, so I’m inclined to tell you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Please,” was all I could whisper.

Mammon made a pained sound. “Begging me unprompted.” He gave me a longing look, then banged his head against the door jamb. “Honest to Lucifer, your sweetness is wasted on Azazel. Pity you’re bound to *him*. I’d whisk you away and spoil you rotten, sweetheart, but alas, I’m afraid he’d hack off my hands if I dared touch you.” Studying said body parts, he grimaced. “They’re a bitch to regrow.”

I raised both eyebrows, struck mute.

“Anyway...” Mammon shrugged, his easy smile back in place. “Tell me I’m pretty and I shall point you to the hidden passageway. All our rooms in Hell have one—we’re a paranoid bunch, you know.”

“You’re the prettiest man I ever did see,” I said before he even finished his sentence.

He gave me an arch look. “I said compliment me, not lie to me. I’d wager your statement would be true if you hadn’t yet met my irritating uncle.”

Well, damn. Was I that easy to read?

I bit my lip. “I’d walk into a streetlight while craning my neck to get a better look at you?”

He preened. “That’s more like it. All right, so the secret passageway is never in the same place and has to be summoned. You’ll need this.” With a flick of his hand, he produced a notepad and pen out of thin air and began drawing on it. “That’s the sigil Azazel uses for his rooms, and your chances

are good it'll be the same for yours.”

He handed me the notepad.

“How do I...?”

“We use our powers to draw them, but in your case...” He considered me for a moment. “Blood should do it.”

I might have uttered a sound of dismay.

“There’s power in blood.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure if you also received some of Azazel’s powers when you bonded, but when in doubt, go for blood.”

“That just might become my new life motto.”

He chuckled. “I’d really love to be there when you take him on. Give him hell, girl.”

Oh, would I *ever*.

“Thank you so, so much,” I said, clutching the notepad to my chest. “I shall tell you how pretty you are every single time I see you.”

“I’m counting on it.” And with a wink, he was gone, the door locking behind him.

I stared at the sign on the notepad as if it held my salvation. If not that, it definitely was the key to my freedom. Azazel could secure the door more tightly than the national treasury, but with this sigil and the secret passageway I could come and go as I pleased, and he’d be none the wiser.

Oh, to imagine the look on his face when he found me strolling down his halls. For the first time since being dumped here, I felt light with elation—and filled with purpose.

CHAPTER 7

I STARTED WITH PRACTICING TO DRAW THE SIGIL ON THE NOTEPAD. BEFORE I SPILLED MY OWN BLOOD for this, I needed to make sure I could write the symbol perfectly.

Once satisfied I could reproduce it without issue, I laid down the pen, found a free area of wall that could reasonably accommodate a door—and realized I still needed something to cut myself with.

My razor. I retrieved it from the bathroom, along with a towel to wad up excess blood, and went back to my spot in front of the wall. Heart pounding, hands clammy, I stared at the blade in my fingers, hovering over my lower arm.

No way was I cutting myself in the palm. While it was the spot of choice in pretty much all movies and books requiring a pact or an offering of blood for a spell or some such, I'd once read the plea of a fiction-loving doctor who argued that the palm was one of the worst places to make a cut—it was full of nerves, much more so than the lower arm, for example. Same was true for a fingertip. And it would be a pain in the ass to heal, what with how often you flexed your hand and used it for grasping something.

So, lower arm it was.

I just had to make sure I didn't cut any of the veins. I needed a certain amount of blood for the sigil, but not a stream.

My breath was uncomfortably loud in the silence of the room. Hand shaking, I still stared, unable to move, to take that step. I'd never hurt myself on purpose before. It was a lot harder to deliberately slice my own flesh than I'd thought.

I could scratch you.

I froze at the voice in my head. Slowly, I turned to look up at the ceiling, and wouldn't you know it, the hellcat sat lurking half-concealed in the shadows right above me. The firelight reflected in its luminous eyes, and its tail swished languidly in the air.

"Um, no." I cleared my throat. "No, thanks."

I'd be careful. Just a scratch. Its wings flared a little. *And I'd lick it clean right after.*

"Yeah, no. That's what I'm worried about." I gave it some major side-eye.

Its claws scraped over the rafters as it shifted its weight, and I had the impression it was faintly amused.

Great, just great. I'd probably have to incinerate the bloody towel afterwards just to make sure my live-in fire extinguisher monster didn't snack on it and develop a taste for my blood.

Okay. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Steady hand...and cut.

Before I could waver again, I sliced the razor over the outside of my lower arm. The pain was sharp, but abated quickly, then settled into a more dull throbbing. I'd cut myself while shaving before,

and it mostly just hurt when water hit the wound or the skin pulled tight when I moved. Hopefully this wouldn't be that much different.

Blood welled at the cut, and I touched my finger to it.

Showtime.

Thankfully, the stone wall was smooth enough to draw on, and I wrote the sigil as best I could in continuous strokes, touching my finger again to the gash in my arm when I needed more blood. Upon finishing the last stroke, the sigil lit up briefly, reminiscent of the glow of the symbols I'd seen Azazel draw for the hellgate and outside on the balcony.

Silently, an outline manifested in front of my eyes. A second later, the wall sported a real passageway. No door to close on this one, just an open arch into darkness. A slight breeze blew through it, brushing with a chill over my skin. Definitely not an illusion.

Alrighty. I licked over the gash on my arm to crudely disinfect it, then pressed the towel to it.

My saliva has healing properties.

"Still nope." I cast a wary glance upward. "Nice try, though."

Suit yourself.

I raised a brow and turned to the doorway. Better to walk right through it, before it vanished. Who knew how long it would last? And how would I get back?

"Um." I faced the hellcat again. "Will this spell work the other way around too? Can I get back here when I draw the symbol out there?"

The lines are all connected. A web of sorts. Here and there, and back again and to a place you haven't been. Be careful that you seek the right one.

"Wha—" I shook my head. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Yes, and no.

"Can't you just give me a straight answer?"

I'm a cat.

"Ugh. Fine. Thanks anyway."

You can leave the towel. I'll...take care of it.

I raised both brows and hurried into the dark archway. "Byyyyyyye."

The air held a welcome chill, much more in line with what one would expect from a stone building than the pressing heat in my rooms. Goosebumps beaded on my skin as I cautiously stepped forward. The light spilling in from the room behind me was just enough to illuminate the path in front of me. That was, until it vanished.

Darkness fully enveloped me, like a complete blackout blanket thrown over my head. Trying not to panic, I wrapped the towel around my arm and fastened it as well as possible, then reached out with both hands in search of the walls. My fingertips connected with cool stone, and I inched forward, using the wall to guide me.

I stopped short when I hit a dead end.

Crap. There was no door here. And only darkness behind me. I'd figured this would be a tunnel, with another archway at the end, waiting for me to walk through. I had the sinking feeling that if I turned around and retraced my steps, I wouldn't find the original doorway again—only a blank stone wall, like here.

Was I trapped?

Panic welled inside me. I shoved it down mercilessly. Freaking out wouldn't help me.

Think, Zoe, think.

Maybe I needed to draw the sigil again? I could still squeeze out enough blood from the cut in my

arm, I was sure, but...it was pitch black. I couldn't see my own hand in front of my eyes, let alone the wall or anything I drew on it.

Well, should have thought of that before I stepped into a dark archway, shouldn't I? I groaned at my thoughtlessness. Next time I'd bring a torch, or a candle, anything to light my way.

If there was a next time.

Okay. Berating myself wouldn't get me anywhere. I could only try to draw that sigil and hope I got all the strokes right, even without seeing them.

I unwrapped the towel from my arm, squeezed the gash—ouch—and tipped my finger in the warm liquid I could only feel, not see.

My heart thundered in my head, and I sweated so much I didn't even feel the chill anymore.

There, the last stroke. I hoped.

The glow that had been faint before in my room now blinded me. I closed my hurting eyes, ready to weep with relief. It worked. It actually worked.

When I opened my eyes again, I squinted at the light, which was insanely bright compared to the utter darkness of a minute ago. It took me a few seconds of my eyes adjusting, but then I made out the hallway behind the archway.

Yes!

I rushed out before that doorway decided to trap me again.

Licking over the gash once more and then rebandaging the wound with the towel, I glanced around. Freedom. The possibilities made me dizzy.

Or maybe that was the blood loss.

Right. So, which way to go, which way to go...? I had to be careful not to run into any of the small demons, or else my little excursion would be cut short. I should have brought a handheld mirror to peek around corners or something like that.

Mental note: Plan your next sneak escape better.

I'd just been so excited to finally have a way out that I hadn't taken the time to prepare well. Live and learn.

I decided to go left. Interestingly, I couldn't see the door to my room to my right, even though it should be there, given the layout of the room and the place where I'd summoned the passageway.

Then again, the tunnel had been a lot longer than the depth of the stone wall. When the door to my room had been open, I'd seen how deep the wall was...an arm's length, at most. The passageway had stretched on for several yards—I'd walked for at least two minutes.

Weird magic.

Shaking my head, I snuck down the hallway then stopped. I should mark this spot. If I didn't get caught, I needed to be able to come back here and summon the passageway again to get back to my rooms. If the hellcat's rambling held any kind of truth, the exact place where I summoned that door might play an important role. As well as intention, maybe?

This was worse than trying to assemble Swedish furniture with a picture-only manual that didn't make sense and a kit that was missing key parts.

In fact, it was a good idea to mark my progress through the hallways in general, like leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to lead me back to this spot. From what I had seen in my first escape attempt, the hallway didn't change much in appearance, and if I didn't leave any hints, I'd get lost.

I remembered how long Azazel had walked when he'd carried me to my rooms...this house was huge, with intricate turns and a maze-like structure to the hallways. And worse than the idea of getting caught—with my luck, I'd run smack dab into Azazel himself—was the possibility of having to

actually seek out either him or his demon underlings to lead me back if I couldn't find my own way. Which was terrifyingly likely if I didn't mark the places I passed.

Only problem was—I didn't have a tool to mark the wall or floor in any way. If I had a knife or something similar, I could scratch the stone in a certain pattern. But of course, my demon douche of a husband hadn't supplied me with a weapon. To be fair, I would have contemplated using it against him.

I stared at the wall and uttered a sound of frustration. There was only one thing in my arsenal to use as a way marker, and I hurt just thinking about it.

Nothing for it...there really was no other choice.

With a sigh, I unwrapped the towel from my arm again and pinched the wound. It was still unscabbed anyway.

I dabbed my finger in the blood and then touched the wall. A little should do. Drawing a sign wasn't necessary, I just needed something to recognize if I came by here again. To be sure I'd remember that this was the spot to summon the passageway, I gave the wall two dots. Any future hallways to mark would get only one.

And thus I began my journey through Azazel's medieval mansion.

The hallways truly never changed much. Rough-hewn stone, lit by torches, the space large enough for two male demons with their wings out passing each other without touching, and a ceiling so high that it was lost in murky darkness.

Here and there I came by doors, but they were closed and I didn't dare try to open them. What if someone was on the other side, and by peeking inside I'd reveal my presence? I knew better than to push my luck. The risk of running into Azazel or someone else who knew I shouldn't be out here was already high enough. I didn't need to increase it by poking at doors.

I walked for what seemed like an hour. Without my phone or another clock it was hard to track time, but it got more and more difficult to keep the gash on my arm open to extract more blood. I'd gotten so used to the never-changing appearance of the hallways that I stopped dead in my tracks when I came upon a wholly different sight.

The open doorway I'd just walked through led into a much larger hall. Instead of walls all around, this time there were windows on one side. If you could call them windows.

Huge pillars made up the entire left side of the hall, the space between them allowing a view of the outside. There seemed to be panes of glass between them too, but not just that...a pattern of bars stretched between the pillars, like a giant grid of what looked like wrought iron. Like a prison, to keep someone in. Or...the fortification of a castle, to keep someone out.

In a daze, I moved closer to the windows. I hadn't seen the outside since Azazel flew me here, and even then I'd only caught glimpses.

It was still dark outside. Or yet again? Maybe this was the permanent state of Hell, no change from day to night, just relentless, ever-same twilight. It would be a sort of torture in itself, I mused. I knew that locking someone in a room with the lights always on was used by some secret agencies as a way of breaking people. We're not made to endure monotony like that.

The sky lit up in red and orange hues, streaks of purple lightning flashing for a few seconds before the gloom returned. Somewhere in the distance sparks erupted as if from a volcano. When the next lightning broke up the darkness, I spotted flying shapes, moving fast across the sky. Even though they were thousands of feet away, I could tell they were bigger than regular birds.

I shivered, yet I couldn't wrench my eyes away from the view. The bleakest sort of landscape, an apocalyptic tableau come to life. My mind still struggled to understand this was real, wasn't a scene

from a movie. I saw it, and yet I didn't get it. Not truly. It would probably take me wandering through that dismal scenery, touching it, smelling it, feeling it on my skin to fully understand—and I had no desire to be out there.

A commotion to my left jolted me out of my trance. The sounds of someone approaching from the direction I'd come. Shit. I needed to keep moving.

Heart in my throat, I rushed to the other side of the hall, skidded around the corner of the open archway there, into the next hallway. Behind me, deep growls and the rapid clicks of claws on stone.

I almost stumbled. Those noises...the gremlin demons had sounded different, even when they chased me down. Their snarls had been higher-pitched, their footfalls softer, no claws, just the muted slapping of fabric-soled feet.

Whatever was behind me seemed a lot more animalistic, primal...predatory.

My sneakers squeaked on the floor as I rounded another bend. No time to mark the walls here. I hadn't yet dared to cast a glance over my shoulder to see what was hunting me, but my gut told me that if it caught me, the result wouldn't be so benign as a horde of goblin demons hog-tying me and carrying me back to my room. Our human gecko brain survival instinct was there for a reason, and right now it blared at the highest setting for me to run for my life.

I listened without even thinking twice.

The growls came closer. Panting, I ducked my head and ran faster, pushing myself to my limit. I had no idea how long I could keep this up. What was my exit strategy here? I couldn't run forever, in fact it was likely the things chasing me would catch up soon. If they were anything like most predatory species on Earth, they'd be faster than a mere human.

The walls flew by as I raced. I could swear something was literally snapping at my heels. Suppressing a shriek, I scrambled around the next corner, right into another large hall, bigger even than the one I'd seen before. Statues lined the walls, as far as I could see at a glance, not having the time to look closely. There seemed to be artworks as well, some sort of 3D paintings or flat sculptures adorning the stone.

My gaze caught on something in between the statues. No way. This could just be my saving grace.

I veered toward that wall, sprinted even harder, the things chasing me now almost breathing down my neck. I nearly crashed into the stone with how fast I came in, but I managed to grab hold of one of the two swords displayed on a wall mount, wrench it away from its fastening, and turn with it just in time to face the first beast lunging at me.

Oh, my God.

I froze in terror, my mind simply blanking at the sight of the creatures. A far cry from hellcats, these...things were an abomination, something straight out of a horror flick or the worst kind of nightmare.

In the split second of suspended time as the nearest of them pounced right on to my raised sword, I caught a glimpse of unnaturally long limbs, dark gray skin, a body structure somewhere between canine and feline, with a twist of vomit-inducing strangeness.

The next instant, my arms jolted from the impact of the creature upon the sword. Pain reverberated up from my wrists, into my shoulders, and I barely held on to the blade. A yowl echoed in the hall, ear-splitting and nauseating. Black blood splashed onto my face, my hands, a body thumping to the ground—right before the next beast lunged.

I didn't know what I was doing, I had no idea how to wield a sword, all I knew was that hacking and slashing and waving that thing around was better than rolling over and letting myself be eaten.

I managed maybe three hits before the pack toppled me to the ground. A jaw clamped around my

ankle and pulled me off balance even as I flailed with the sword to keep another beast at bay. I cried out, sharp, ripping tears shooting up from my leg before everything hurt in a kaleidoscope of pain as I hit the hard stone.

Growls and teeth and blood and claws, closing in and crashing over me in a wave of death impending.

A sharp word echoed in the hall, rose above the snarls, and whipped the beasts on top of me like a physical lash. With a keening whine, the creatures fell off me, scattering like cockroaches when the lights turned on.

Breath heavy, my body aching in a hundred places at once, I pushed myself up, the sword still in one hand. My left leg, the one that had been attacked by the beasts first, almost gave out under me. I grabbed on to the nearest statue in order not to fall.

Blinking against the pain and the drops of blood running down my forehead, I stared at the demon who'd just saved my ass.

White-blond hair fell down to his shoulders, framing a face of ethereal, light brown beauty. Goddammit, were all demons that appallingly attractive? Figured. He could have stepped out of one of Peter Jackson's Tolkien adaptations, all masculine elven grace and subtly arrogant posture.

Dressed in a mix of elegant robes and fighting gear, he stepped closer, the light of the torches and chandeliers gilding his hair. Azazel and Azmodea both had an impressive amount of power radiating from them, but this guy...he was something else. Such ancient, ancient strength and energy rolled off him, I resisted the urge to fall to my knees and cower. It was similar to looking at a mountain range that has been on Earth for millions of years, indomitable, unmoving, unperturbed by the passage of days and the hustle of life, only with this demon that feeling was multiplied by a thousand.

"How intriguing." His voice a deep bass, he tilted his head in a distinctly non-human way. "You are not a half-blood. Nor a damned soul."

Rustling behind him, a tentative female whisper. "My lord..."

The demon held up a hand, and whoever had spoken behind him fell silent.

Another step closer, and the powerful being was right in front of me, his violet eyes holding me spellbound.

"Tell me," he said—and honest to God, I was ready to tell him anything and everything— "who are you?"

"Zoe," I whispered.

"And who *are* you?"

"I...I'm Azazel's...wi—"

I hadn't even heard him approach. One minute my entire world was zeroed in on the demon in front of me, the next instant a hand clamped over my mouth and pulled me back against a hard surface.

"Pet," a familiar voice said from behind me, the deep baritone rumbling through my back pressed to his chest. "She's my pet."

The weird spell I'd been under effectively broken, I blinked, wanted to shake my head...only Azazel's hand still on my mouth held me fast. His fingers smelled faintly of leather, metal, and fire, and inhaling his scent catapulted me back to that moment during the flight over here when I'd given in to the urge to lick his skin.

Heat centered low in my belly, and I clenched my thighs to alleviate the sudden ache between my legs.

"Pet?" the other demon asked, his curious gaze now focused over my head, on the irritatingly hot male clutching me to him.

“A special deal we made,” Azazel said nonchalantly, and if it weren’t for the tension in his hand, I’d have believed him to be completely relaxed and in control. “She is to serve me here in her human form in repayment for a debt.”

Excuse me?

I widened my eyes and grabbed on to Azazel’s arm, trying to dislodge his hand from my mouth. I might as well have attempted to move a full-grown redwood tree by shoving at it. Outrage building inside me, I tried to speak, which of course came out as pathetically muffled mumbling.

A push against my mind, a weird popping sensation in my head, and then I heard Azazel’s voice like my own thoughts, much like the hellcat’s words had somehow sounded directly projected into my head.

You better play along.

Out loud, he said, “Unfortunately, she is still a bit rough around the edges.” He wiped a trail of blood from my cheek with his other hand, making me quiver. “She shouldn’t have been wandering around my house on her own. More training—” now his free hand settled around my throat, and my traitorous nipples pebbled underneath my tank top and bra “—will ensure she remembers how to obey...and please.”

His teeth closed around the top of my ear. My legs, the fiends, threatened to turn to cooked spaghetti.

You have got to be kidding me, I thought with as much force as I could muster, hoping to push back along the same line of mental communication as he’d done. *You’re passing me off as your...submissive sex pet?*

Your powers of deduction are astounding, he said in my mind.

The other demon raised a brow, a glint of humor in his lavender eyes. “I didn’t know you had such inclinations, Azazel.”

A soft laugh from my devious demon husband. “She begged to be of service. And who am I to refuse a human offering when it lays itself so sweetly at my feet?”

Oh, no, he didn’t. Before I knew what I was doing, I bit his hand and twisted out of his hold in the second of surprise.

I opened my mouth to—

Do. Not.

Azazel’s growl filled my mind, shocked me enough to falter.

Outwardly, he was the epitome of calm, poised and in control as ever, not a single dark hair out of place, his power a velveteen caress.

Inside my head, his energy scratched me raw. An acrid scent permeated my mental senses, and it took me a second to realize its nature.

I closed my mouth, stared at him in dumbfounded amazement. *You’re afraid,* I whispered with a mental push.

Lightning flashed in his eyes as he glared at me.

I didn’t hear what the other demon said next, my thoughts racing, putting the pieces together.

Azazel didn’t want his visitor to find out the true nature of our relationship, that much was clear. And the taste of panic underlying his snarled warning not to divulge the truth hinted at the reason why... I thought of how both Azmodea and Mammon had taken the news of my “tricking” Azazel into a marriage contract as something to be weaponized against him, albeit with familial affection and a teasing intention.

What would someone outside his trusted family circle do with this information? If this was

enough to get him a hundred years of being lovingly picked on by his sister and nephew, what would the revelation of this secret do to his reputation among other demons?

At first, I'd thought he was trying to humiliate me by passing me off as his sex pet. Now, though, I realized it was the other way around—he was the one who didn't want to be humiliated in front of his peer by his shameful secret getting out.

Talk about a chink in his armor. This was much more than that. All this time, he'd appeared so invulnerable, like nothing could truly faze him. He was in control, he held all the cards, and I had literally no power in this farce of a relationship.

Well, that was about to change.

CHAPTER 8

A SLOW, WICKED SMILE SPREAD ON MY FACE. ALL THESE THOUGHTS HAD RUN THROUGH MY HEAD IN A matter of seconds, and now I stared at him with the biggest shit-eating grin I could muster.

He narrowed his eyes the tiniest fraction, imperceptible unless one was watching him closely, which I was.

What do I get in return? I pushed along the mental line between us.

What? His energy was a whip across my senses.

While he exchanged some more chit chat with the other demon, I continued our silent communication.

You want me to play along and hide the fact that I'm your wife, your very human wife who tricked you, the mighty Azazel, into an embarrassing contract you can't get out of. I'll do it, but there's a price for everything. What was it you said? Nothing in Hell is free except the illusion of kindness. I want something in return for my trouble, sweetheart.

It was disconcerting how he could carry on a conversation with someone, seemingly at ease and unperturbed, while his mental focus was directed at me, his power searing the edges of my mind. And that burning sensation got all the worse at my last volley, at the proverbial glove slapped across his face.

Your price, he snarled inside my head, *is that I won't string you up in my dungeon to be snacked on by the hellrats.*

I'm tired of your threats, I hissed back. *No, honey, if you want me to save your face in front of your friend here, you will agree to my demands, or you'll find out just how fast I can retell your tale of woe and ruin your reputation.*

Maybe I should have felt bad for holding his image on a knife's edge like that, for playing on his fears and threatening to make him the laughingstock of Hell. Then again, he'd shown me time and again that he didn't care about my fears or needs, that he didn't give a shit whether I'd lose my mind in a gilded cage of isolation. He fully knew what loneliness would do to me, and yet he kept me cut off anyway.

Tit for tat, then. I would take a page out of his playbook and counter his cruelty with my own.

His voice echoed with rolling thunder in my head. *What do you want?*

Visits to Earth, I shot back. *I don't care how much you have to pay for them, but you'll take me whenever I ask you, as often as I want.*

There are limits, he replied with a growl. *Physical limits for you and for me. You can't stay too long, and you can't visit too often.*

Fine, then within those limits, as much as I desire. You'll take me there, no tricks, no excuses.

Within reason. I do have a life and tasks that need my attention here.

I narrowed my eyes. *All right, but you will not use that as an excuse to avoid taking me. You agree to facilitate my visits to Earth unless you are truly needed down here, for a task of real urgency or a commitment you cannot postpone. Using your work or personal appointments as a pretense to avoid taking me to Earth is not allowed.*

I had the inkling that it was important to spell out my demands in as clear a way as possible, leaving him no space to wiggle out later. If the lore about demons and deals was even a bit true, then he'd have to abide by a contract made, in all its literality. If the words were too vague, he'd exploit that for sure.

Agreed. His mental voice sounded distinctly as if he were grinding his teeth.

I felt his attention fully shift to the other demon, and I hurried to add, *One more thing.*

The quicksilver in his eyes burned me as he brought his gaze back to me.

I want to move freely in your house.

His power scraped along my senses like cut glass over my skin. *So you can get torn apart by inferni?* His eyes dropped to the still bleeding wounds on my legs. *Have you considered, in that impertinent, naive little head of yours, that keeping you in your rooms was a means of protection? If you'd stopped for one second and looked past your own impulsive ego, you might just have realized that not every perceived slight is an act of cruelty. And that traipsing around in Hell as a vulnerable human without powers makes you easy prey.*

I sucked in a breath, my smug smile slipping. Damn if his words didn't ring true. I hadn't considered that, and it smarted. Then again—

And seeing as I am a lowly human without mind reading powers, I mentally spit at him, you could have just explained your reasoning to me to help my naive little head understand the situation. Being upfront with why you're keeping me under lock and key would have gone a long way toward my acceptance of it.

I am not in the habit of having to explain obvious circumstances to shortsighted fools. He cast me a cold glance before focusing on his visitor again. *It's settled then. You'll remain in your rooms unless I take you to Earth.*

The fuck I will. I wrenched his attention back to me with my snarled riposte. *If going out alone is too dangerous, you will provide me with protection. I don't care whether that's a hellhound or a demon bodyguard, but I will have someone or something at my disposal to help me move freely and safely through your house.*

That, he said in my head, his voice a whispered menace, *will be your final demand. I agree to your terms, and this negotiation is hereby completed.*

Deal. I gave him the mockery of a smile.

Try it with less teeth, my love. A smoldering look from his hooded eyes. *We don't want our guest to think your supplication anything less than genuine, now do we?*

Of course not, I clipped back, and modulated my smile into something less aggressive.

Oh, and one more thing. Azazel's mental voice was a purr that stroked me in places threatening to purr back. *On your knees.*

Excuse you?

We have a deal. You're my pet. Pets belong at their owner's feet.

My nostrils flared.

Chop, chop.

I would murder him. Somehow. But because he was right, and I'd agreed to this bargain, I

swallowed the insult to my pride and sank down to my knees, wincing at the pain in my legs.

His hand settled on my head the next instant, and warmth flowed from his touch. I gasped softly as I realized it wasn't just the usual heat of his body, but his power running in rivulets over my skin, into my cells, fusing what was torn. A glance at the gash in my arm confirmed that my wounds were healing right before my eyes.

The throbbing of pain in my legs eased, vanished, and I couldn't help sighing.

I wouldn't thank him. Would. Not.

And yet, some of the involuntary gratitude I felt must have leaked out of my thoughts because his dark voice murmured in my head.

You're welcome.

His fingers stroked over my scalp, and to my dismay I almost melted on the spot. I never had been able to resist the allure of a good head massage.

It wouldn't do to leave my pet bleeding.

Aaaaaand there he went again, making me want to stab him.

Are those your favorite pants? I asked along our mental line.

I sensed his confusion and smiled sweetly just before I rubbed my still blood-streaked cheek against his leg. Human blood might not have shown on the dark red fabric, but the black goo of the things that had attacked me stained the pants just so.

He ran his nails over my scalp in a move not quite painful, but definitely not a caress either. *You're going to pay for that.*

Out loud, he said, "I'm afraid Zoe here is in dire need of a bath and a change of clothes, so if you'll excuse her, she'll be heading to her quarters to wash up."

It was amazing how he could sound both courteous toward his visitor and mildly threatening to me, with something as innocuous as an instruction to retreat to my suite.

He made a sweeping gesture with his arm, indicating the other side of the hall. "Hekesha will escort you to the room, Lord Zaquiel. I'll be joining you shortly."

The other demon—Zaquiel—inclined his head and made as if to turn away. Pausing, he glanced over his shoulder. "Do bring your pet when you join us, Azazel. It'd be a shame to hide her." His violet eyes gave me a once over. "I'd like to see her all cleaned up."

Azazel's fingers in my hair tightened just the slightest bit. "Certainly, my lord."

Still kneeling on the floor, I watched the female demon—Hekesha—lead Zaquiel through an archway on the opposite side of the hall.

A heartbeat of suspended inertia and tense silence after they'd disappeared out of sight—and then Azazel had me up against the wall.

My back met the stone, and I uttered an oof, the breath rushing out of me. He'd moved so fast, I hadn't even seen or felt him pull me up. Now his body pressing into mine held me pinned against the wall, all hard muscle and unmovable strength, his power a whisper of darkness with a bite.

"You," he said, his face so close to mine I could see the iridescent silver in his eyes swirl in a way no human iris should be able to, "will regret this."

I still had trouble catching my breath, but not from the impact of him pushing me against the wall anymore. It had to be a sign of impending madness that it was all I could do not to wrap my legs around his hips. God, but I *wanted* to.

Before I could ask him what part exactly I'd be so very sorry for—I could name a few things where I'd been pushing my luck in the past couple hours—he brought up his hand to stroke over my throat and muttered, "I was willing to let you go with a warning, make this a short lesson in humility

and send you back to your rooms. By piquing the curiosity of our guest, however, you just bought yourself an extended time pretending to be my devoted pet. You will clean up, slip into something more appropriate—” his hand moved torturously close to the neckline of my tank top “—and then you’ll have the pleasure of serving me at our little get-together.”

I squirmed under his touch, my legs twitching with the urge to lift up and clasp him closer. The pulse ticking low at the apex of my thighs craved some more pressure, irritatingly so.

“And you better play your part *perfectly*,” Azazel continued in a silken murmur. “Or else our little bargain is null and void.”

I narrowed my eyes. That was a gauntlet thrown if I’d ever seen one. “You want a show?” I asked with a saccharine smile. “I’ll give you the performance of your lifetime.”

“Careful with that promise.” He raised a brow. “Considering I’ve lived for thousands of years, the bar is set high, my dear.”

Stepping away, he grabbed my arm and pulled me after him as he strode toward another archway leading away from the large hall. I scrambled to keep up and not do a full face plant. His pace brisk, he yanked me down the hallway, in another direction than the one I’d come from when I’d fled from the creatures.

As far as I could see, the walls were bare of the marks I’d left, which meant we must be yet in a part of his labyrinthian house that I hadn’t explored earlier.

When I stumbled and almost tripped, he grabbed me around my waist, slung me over his shoulder and walked on at a clipped pace.

“Hey!” I managed to wheeze while bouncing with his steps. “You don’t have to carry me like some ill-tempered barbarian. I can walk just fine.”

“Not fast enough,” he growled. “Zaquiël has requested your presence, and you will not displease him by wasting time. You do not keep a Fallen waiting.”

“Fallen?”

His answer came grudgingly, impatience clear in the tone of his voice. “One of the angels who fought and fell with Lucifer. The original demons.” His hand holding on to my thigh tightened. “As much as you enjoy poking at me, you better hold your tongue in his presence. He is not to be trifled with.”

And from the way they’d interacted and addressed each other, Zaquiël clearly outranked Azazel.

“Okay,” I wheezed. I had no intention of riling up a demon more powerful than Azazel who wasn’t contractually obligated to not kill me. There was rightful defiance, and then there was utter stupidity. I tried to steer clear of the latter.

A moment of silence while he kept carrying me in a rush.

“Just *okay*? What—no saucy comeback, no spiteful challenge?”

“Contrary to your impression of me,” I ground out, “I do have *some* sense of self-preservation.”

“Hidden underneath misguided pride and impulsive intractability,” he muttered.

I gasped. “That’s rich coming from the guy who’s too high-and-mighty to explain the basics of Hell to someone *who’s never been here*.”

I expected a snarly reply, instead he paused for a second, and I heard the click of a door opening. The next moment he carried me into a dimly lit room, kicking the door shut behind us, and strode on while I strained to make out my surroundings.

This wasn’t my suite.

And not just that, but I recognized the furniture from the day he’d brought me to Hell—we’d come through these rooms when we first entered the house.

Sure enough, the next room he carried me through was the one with the huge bed and seating area, the one with the balcony where he'd landed. He didn't stop here, though. Without pause, he continued on to yet another room.

Torches flared up as he stepped inside, illuminating a cavernous room tiled in silver-veined black marble. A bathroom, its size and equipment on the upper end of luxury, glossy surfaces gleaming in the light of the flames.

He set me down and gestured at the enormous shower in one corner. It seemed big enough to accommodate fully extended wings, no glass enclosure, no curtain, just a step down into an area that was easily bigger than my shared dorm room in college.

I caught my breath and looked around. "Why didn't you take me to my rooms?"

"Mine are closer."

That yanked my gaze back to him. These were his quarters.

I tried to peer around him into what was his personal bedroom, but he snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"In there, now." He pointed at the shower area. "And do not dawdle."

I wanted to snap at him for being a presumptuous ass, but my words died a shameful death on my tongue when he stripped out of his shirt. I stared. And stared.

Godfuckingdammit, if there ever was perfection of the male form, it stood right there, limned by the glow of the fires as if the light itself wanted to lick him.

I understood that urge far better than I was comfortable with.

Built with just the right amount of bulk, his muscled form spoke to every intrinsically heterosexual part of my femininity, from the broad shoulders, massive pecs, ribbed abs to the tapered waist...and those arms. Good lord. Arm porn was a real thing, and his were a prime example. A dusting of dark hair covered his chest and trailed down over his abdomen, disappearing underneath the waistline like some sinful lure.

"You've got something there," he said, tapping the corner of his mouth. "Looks like drool."

That snapped me out of my embarrassing stare-a-thon like nothing else. "Puke is more like it," I growled back. "And you better not plan on joining me in the shower." Crossing my arms, I hoped the irritation in my voice hid my nerves. I certainly didn't want him to see my sudden apprehension about the prospect of being naked in front of him. Or him in front of me. "We haven't started our pretend play yet."

"Why, my impulsive human, are you afraid you won't be able to control your urges and ravish me?" His eyes gleamed, and he laid one hand over his heart. "How considerate of you to care about my honor."

I glanced around in search of something sharp to stab him with.

"Never to worry," he continued, "there will be plenty of time for you to act on your base desires later. You have five minutes to wash up."

And with that, he left the bathroom, the door softly falling shut behind him.

I exhaled, releasing the tension that had locked my muscles. For a moment there, I'd thought—I shook my head, remembering Azmodea's words. *He's not the sort to take what isn't offered.*

Okay, then. Okay. I blew out another breath and stripped out of my blood-soiled and torn clothes. If it was weird to stand butt-naked in Azazel's personal bathroom, with him waiting just on the other side of the door, I totally didn't feel it. Nope, not at alllllll.

I hurried into the shower area and fiddled with the controls until streams of water fell from the multiple heads in the ceiling. Thankfully, with Hell's climate, it wasn't a gush of ice-cold water that

hit me, but a warm shower, like a summer rain.

I grabbed the bar of soap from the shelf and started lathering myself from head to toe, all the while replaying the events that led me here.

Had I actually managed to *bargain* with Azazel? *Successfully*? I still couldn't believe it. Such a stroke of luck to discover his one weakness, and to use it to my advantage. Finally, the kind of leverage I needed to exert any amount of power, to level the scales between us just a little bit.

For however long that would last...

At least I'd gotten my two most important demands fulfilled. With our bargain ensuring he'd have to take me to visit Earth as much as I wanted, as well as allowing me freedom of movement within his house, the threat of mental death by boredom and isolation was officially off the table. I could breathe easier knowing I'd have *some* semblance of a life down here, rather than a semi-comfortable prison sentence.

I could work with that. Everything else would fall into place somehow.

Of course, there was the matter of my side of the bargain...

Now, if Taylor had been here, she'd have grabbed me by my shoulders and tried to shake some sense into me while yelling, "*Have you lost your mind?*"

Given that neither Tay nor anyone else with a lick of reason was here, though, I was alone with the embarrassingly eager part of myself that looked forward to my little charade with Azazel. Sometimes—okay, all too often—my good sense lost the fight to dangerous defiance, and I lived and breathed for a level of contrariness that was worrisome.

I knew what Azazel was doing. I recognized spite when I saw it. He wanted to put me in my place, punish me for my recalcitrance by making me uncomfortable in my role as his "pet." Well, if he thought he could embarrass me and would see me cringe, he had another think coming.

I would show him *up*. I'd play my part so well, he'd be fooled right alongside that bigwig Zaquiel. He wanted to use sex as a means to fluster me? Oh, I'd fluster *him*. Right then and there, I swore I'd make him so hot under the collar, he'd blow steam even in Hell's unrelenting heat.

The fragrance of the soap permeated the air, the same slightly spicy note I'd scented on Azazel, and I realized I would step out of this shower smelling like him from head to toe. Not that it affected me in any way.

Nope.

All clean, I shut off the water, rubbed myself dry with the huge fluffy towel hanging nearby, and wrapped it securely around me. It did a great job covering me from my chest down to below my knees, and I didn't feel quite as exposed as I'd feared. My hair hung still mostly wet around my shoulders, but I hadn't seen another towel large enough to wrap it up in. Steeling my spine, I opened the door to the bedroom.

His back turned to me, Azazel was in the process of pulling on a new pair of pants, and the one-second glimpse of his bare ass before the fabric covered it was enough to completely jumble my thoughts.

Heat flooded my already shower-warm skin, centered low in my abdomen with an irritating pulse. It wasn't fair. Such bitability should be prohibited.

"When you're done admiring the view," he said without sparing a glance at me while fastening his pants, "put that on." He jerked his head at the bed.

Yanking myself out of my trance, I looked at the item he'd indicated.

Draped across the comforter lay a dress from my own wardrobe, and—likely not quite so incidentally—the most revealing piece of clothing I owned, aside from underwear, of course. Skin-

tight, the blue sheath-style dress would mold to my body as if painted on, but not just that—it was mainly made of lace, see-through enough around the torso to grant enticing glimpses of anything underneath. It was meant to be worn with a decorative bra teasing through the lace, in a confident display of one's own goodies at an opportunity that would invite such ostentatious eroticism...a bachelorette party, for example.

I'd never gotten up the nerve to actually wear it, and it had hung untouched in my closet for over a year.

"How did you—" I brushed my fingers over the filigree lace. "Did you run out and get this from my rooms just now?" Remembering the time it had taken to walk from his quarters to my suite that first day we'd arrived, I added, "Don't tell me you kept this in here all this time." I threw a salacious smile at him. "If you needed things of mine to sniff at and rub yourself on, my panties would be the more obvious choice, don't you think?"

His gaze was molten as he raised a hand, and a towel appeared in his palm. "It's called summoning. I can call on and materialize any object that is physically within my own estate and that I have seen before." He threw the towel at me. "For your hair."

I caught the towel before it hit me in the face and wrapped it around my head. "Nice trick," I muttered, trying to stifle my envy.

Demon powers sure came in handy. Not that I wanted wings, or the ability to set my skin on fire, or heal wounds, or disperse a pack of bloodthirsty inferni-something creatures with a single word—okay, yes, fine, I did want all that. But hey, I could spontaneously mash up two sentences to create an epically embarrassing phrase in just the right situation, like that one time at the Target checkout when I struggled to pull my wallet out of my tote bag and my brain couldn't decide between telling the cashier, "Hold on for a moment" and "Give me a minute," so what I blurted out was, "Hold me for a minute," so yeah, at least I had that going for me. Takes a special talent in the oral arts, that one.

Picking up the dress, I frowned. Checked the bed. Frowned some more. "Where," I asked my devious demon, "is the bra?"

He didn't even pause while shrugging into a new shirt, and the sight of his muscled torso in fluid motion temporarily stole my breath. "What bra?"

I cleared my throat. "This dress needs a bra. It's almost completely see-through." I demonstrated the level of transparency in the chest area by slipping my hand inside.

"I know." He buttoned his shirt while regarding me with a glint in his eyes. "So?"

I breathed in and out through my nose, steady myself. "Summon me one of my bras." Realizing something, I added in a voice that was rapidly losing any steadiness I had managed, "And *panties!*"

The lace pattern of the dress did get denser below the hips, to the point the material wasn't see-through anymore where it covered the butt and crotch area, but *still*.

"You seem to labor under the impression that you have any demands left to make." He closed the distance between us with sinful grace and sensual menace, his fingers grabbing the knot in the towel wrapped around my body. "Let me disabuse you of that notion."

He pulled just enough that the knot loosened just so, and I clasped the edges of the towel to hold it in place, my heart racing.

"Zaquiël is waiting. There is no time for your compulsive obstinacy. You either put this dress on yourself in the next minute, or I will put you in it." His expression clearly said he preferred the latter.

It should have sounded like a threat. Really. Any woman with two brain cells left would have taken it as one. Apparently, I had less than that because for a second there, I considered resorting to the kind of defiance that would immediately get me option number two.

Glaring at him with what I hoped was haughtiness—and not the unbidden arousal I was trying to keep at bay—I gritted out, “Fine,” turned on my heels and stormed off into the bathroom.

The door closing behind me almost cut off his chuckle. Almost.

CHAPTER 9

THE DRESS FIT ME LIKE A GLOVE. A SUPER SEXY, WHO-ARE-YOU-AND-WHAT-DID-YOU-DO-WITH-ZOE glove, and as I stared at my reflection in the mirror, I was torn between glee that this outfit would torture the fuck out of Azazel, and awkward self-consciousness about demonstrating roughly ten times more sex appeal than in my usual jeans and tank top/T-shirt.

Well, I had no other choice but to flaunt it. Wearing this dress with anything less than self-assured awareness of my own sexuality would not just be a disservice to the outfit, but also—more importantly—would play into Azazel’s little scheme of trying to make me uncomfortable. And I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me embarrassed.

We’d see about other kinds of satisfaction.

When I walked back into the bedroom, it was with a sexy swing to my hips and my head held high. *Let the games begin.*

Azazel was leaning against the door frame to the balcony, his form outlined by the storm of fire and lightning outside. With the lights in the bedroom dimmed low, all I could see in that moment was his shadowy form, silhouetted against the spectacular light show behind him.

But his eyes flared when his gaze fell on me, the silver flash competing with the lightning in the sky.

I couldn’t help it—I preened.

Despite all his bluster from before, his obvious intentions to simply set me aside and not engage with me, he couldn’t ignore me now, could he? I’d vowed not to beg for scraps of his attention, but damn did it feel good when I had his complete focus on me, underlaid with sensual hunger.

“Let’s go,” he said, and it wasn’t just my imagination that his voice had dropped lower, rougher than before.

I felt like a snack dangled in front of a starved lion.

A thought struck me as we walked out into the sitting room, and I halted in my tracks, my stomach dropping to my feet.

“Wait,” I rasped, cleared my throat. “Wait.”

Azazel swung around, his voice sharp and impatient. “What?”

“Will I have to...*serve* Zaquiell?”

It had occurred to me that we hadn’t specified this in our bargain. Azazel hadn’t said a word about the scope of our play, whether I’d be expected, as his “pet,” to be of service to his...friends as well.

Azazel regarded me with an inscrutable expression, and I resorted to nervous babbling, damn my anxiety.

“Will I have to—you know—with him?”

I shifted on the spot, my breath suddenly much too fast. Because while playing with Azazel was one thing—I’d enjoy that enough all right, and it felt like a natural continuation of our interactions so far, not to mention I’d turn it into my own sly method of revenge against *him*—being intimate with someone else, a complete stranger, was another thing altogether.

I wasn’t at all sure I could pull *that* off, and just the thought of it already let unease coil in my stomach.

And damn it all to Hell, now I’d given him all the ammunition he’d need to truly put me in my place. Fuck, fuck, fuck. There’d been no hiding the tremor in my voice, the fidgeting of my hands, and I was sure my apprehension was written all over my face. I might as well have given him a roadmap for how to embarrass me, with a big x right next to “Zoe’s weakness, exploit here.”

With his goal being to make me uncomfortable and teach me a lesson, he could take this huge vulnerability I’d just stupidly revealed in front of him, and slice right into it.

He still stared at me with quiet intensity, and I could already feel the blood welling from the cut he was about to deliver. He’d pass me off to Zaquiel and silently revel in my discomfort, relish his punishment of the recalcitrant human woman who’d dared trap him in this embarrassing contract.

He blinked as the lightning outside the barred window flashed over his face, casting his features in harsh relief. “I don’t share what’s mine.”

A second later, before I could even catch my breath, he’d scooped me up and carried me out into the hallway again, his pace quick as before.

I exhaled with such force, it almost came out as a gasp. The knot in my chest unraveled swiftly, painfully, making me dizzy, and I clung to him, in more ways than I wanted to admit.

It took me several minutes to scrounge up the courage to speak again, but the silence as he carried me was becoming unbearable.

“What kind of party is this?” I finally asked.

“I have business to discuss with Zaquiel. I invited him here to renegotiate a deal we have.”

A business meeting. All right. Okay. A bit strange that I’d be there provocatively dressed and playing Azazel’s pet, but—demons, right?

Azazel set me down in front of a set of huge double doors, intricately carved with scenes depicting winged demons battling some kind of beasts. I smoothed down my dress, checked that the flowing skirt fell naturally from my hips to just above my knees, covering what needed to be covered.

A pop in my head, and then Azazel’s mental voice, strong and deep and sliding over my senses like a caress. *Walk behind me. Lower your gaze in front of Zaquiel and bow deeply when you greet him. Don’t talk unless spoken to. Don’t babble. No snarky comebacks or quipped defiance.* He cast me a sidelong glance. *In fact, maybe it’s better if you don’t speak at all.*

But then how will I praise my master Azazel’s glory to the high heavens? I fluttered my lashes.

The tiniest twitch of his mouth, humor sparking in his eyes. *Lucifer*, he said smoothly. *We praise to Lucifer, not Heaven.*

Duly noted. I faced the doors. *I’ll make sure to change my standard-issue sexclamation to, Oh, Devil!*

He made a noise that sounded awfully like a choked-back laugh. When he spoke in my head, though, his voice was all breath-taking sensuality and self-assured challenge. *I promise you, the only name you’ll moan will be mine.*

Before I could shoot something back, he pushed the doors open and strolled in, fully expecting me to follow in his wake—like the good pet I was.

Gritting my teeth, I did exactly that. A deal was a deal.

The bass beat of drums reverberated in my bones as I stepped inside the room, and a primal, seductive melody wrapped around me, pulled me in. Music? What kind of business meeting was this?

Large enough to rival a small dancing hall, the room held an assortment of seating areas, with settees, chaise lounges, floor pillows, comfy-looking armchairs strewn around the space. In the middle of the room, scantily clad dancers moved sinuously, sensually to the rhythm of the music, played live by a group of demons in one corner, on instruments I didn't recognize.

The low lights glowed warmly on the dancers' skin, played over fabric and metal and jewels adorning the demons present as well as the sumptuous furnishings. My gaze caught on a demon couple in the corner to my left, and I almost missed a step at their state of undress and obvious make-out session.

When you said business meeting, I pushed along the mental line to Azazel, I kind of figured a conference room, or maybe a business casual lounge, or some kind of dinner.

Is this too much for your prudish human sensibilities? His voice held a softly mocking edge.

If I had a knife, that spot right there between his shoulder blades would make for a perfect place to stick it. *A warning would have been nice. Something along the lines of, Hey, by the way, there'll be an orgy, just FYI.*

He threw a glance at me over his shoulder, one corner of his mouth tilted up. *Oh, love. You think this is an orgy?*

I calmed myself by contemplating the many ways I could fillet him.

Stopping in front of a settee, Azazel bowed slightly. "Lord Zaquiel. Thank you for your patience."

He stepped aside and settled on a chaise lounge opposite Zaquiel's seat. Not missing a beat, I took a deep bow toward the Fallen lazily sprawled on the settee's cushion, mindful to keep my gaze down.

"Lovely," the demon murmured. "Her assets really shine when she's free of inferni splatter. I can see why you agreed to keep her."

Take a seat, Azazel said in my mind, subtly pointing to a cushion that had just appeared on the floor at his feet.

"She is proving to be an amusing diversion," he said out loud to Zaquiel.

Determined not to show even an ounce of my irritation, lest he could use it to complain I hadn't held up my end of the bargain, I smiled coyly and slid into a seated position on the cushion, facing Zaquiel's settee. Azazel's legs were on either side of me, effectively caging me in—and making it clear to whom I belonged. It should have rankled and raised my hackles to be so ostentatiously labeled as his...instead it gave me a weird sense of security.

"I trust you've been well taken care of while you were waiting," Azazel said, his hand coming to rest on my head.

Zaquiel raised his glass and nodded at a male demon who passed our seating area. The other male winked, his smile languid and teasing.

"As always," Zaquiel said, "the hospitality of your halls is beyond reproach."

Did you order your people to have sex with your guest? I mentally whispered to Azazel.

A sharp tug on my hair. *Do not insult me.* His energy darkened, pinched my senses. *If the demons in my employ choose to engage with Zaquiel, they do so of their own free will. Look at him.*

I did, struck anew by his unearthly beauty, the impact of his ancient power.

There are many demons who would beg to gain his favor. Any time he visits, several of mine line up to spend time with him.

All right, fine. I relaxed a little. He's a demon snack, got it.

More like a delicacy, but you get the point.

He began stroking my hair in the same languorous rhythm as the music, doubling the effect on my body. Had I held my spine rigid before, I now found myself leaning into his leg...into his touch. His fingers on my scalp drew small circles, and I felt those moves much, much lower, as if he'd established a direct connection between the top of my head and the sensitive spot between my thighs.

A spot currently uncovered by panties, a first for me. I'd never gone commando before, and the feeling was unsettling, in more ways than one. Instead of having at least a flimsy piece of fabric as the pretense of a buffer there, my most intimate skin now rubbed against my legs folded underneath me on the cushion with every little move I made.

It was both arousing and maddening.

Azazel and Zaquiël engaged in what I imagined was demon small talk, mentioning people and places whose significance flew right past me with what little knowledge I had of Hell and its inhabitants. They might as well have been talking in another language.

I did try to pay attention at first, to see if I could glean some more useful information about either Azazel or my new home down here. The longer I sat, however, the more the sensual drums of the music sank into my bones, reverberated in my blood, the more the sight of the dancers twisting and twining to the rhythm in an artistic rendering of sex drew my focus, the more Azazel's caresses—on my head, down to my neck—scattered my thoughts.

By the time Azazel broached what seemed to be the business part of their conversation, I was half feral inside, vacillating between a weird mix of languid sensual relaxation and throbbing need. Any lingering self-consciousness about the amount of skin revealed through the lace of my dress had long slid off me, and all that was left was a creature fitting right in with the sexually charged atmosphere of the room.

Azazel's hand tangled in my hair, pulled my head to the side and back until I could see him out of the corner of my eye. The position forced me to lean back until I was sprawled over his lap from my shoulders up, my breath unsteady and fast.

Go get me a drink, he said in my mind, his other hand stroking a line of heat down my throat, toward the neckline of my dress. *And one for yourself as well, before you catch fire.*

More like dying of boredom, I shot back.

Oh?

With a tug on my hair he made me stand up and immediately tumbled me onto his lap, my legs dangling over his thigh on one side while he held me upright and half leaning against his chest with a firm grip on my hair. My hands reached out to grasp his shirt for purchase. The heat of his body poured into me, ignited the already simmering fire burning in my core.

So if I were to stroke between your legs, he said in a silken murmur, *I wouldn't find you wet?*

My breath hitched. I squirmed in his hold, and even though technically I was still covered, air brushed against the very spot he'd mentioned, proving his assumption true.

Zaquiël said something about streamlining trade processes, and Azazel's reply might have contained something along the lines of decreasing soul qualities, but the words were a blur, drowned out by the hammering of my heartbeat, the drums of the music, the rapid rise and fall of my own breath.

With his focus unnervingly on the conversation with the other demon, Azazel laid his free hand on my knee, slid it higher in oh-so-torturously slow increments. I both dreaded and craved the conclusion to that exploration, unable to do anything but sit still and anticipate.

Now underneath the skirt of my dress, his fingers inched up, drawing tiny circles ever closer to my core.

“I recognize your supply lines are compromised,” he said to Zaquiell. “And I appreciate your willingness to reconsider the terms of our deal.”

Zaquiell’s reply got lost in the undignified sound I made when Azazel’s finger brushed my skin less than an inch from the damningly wet proof of my arousal. I involuntarily jerked on his lap—and my hip rubbed against the very, very hard proof of *his* arousal.

Ha!

I wasn’t the only one affected here. Somehow that realization made me feel a lot better. As cool as he was playing this, he couldn’t deny his own physical reaction to having me squirm on his lap.

And squirm some more I did, just to aggravate his situation a bit.

His grip on my hair tightened, and his fingers dug into my thigh. When I chanced a glance at his face, his pupils had dilated, almost swallowing the lightning storm of his irises. When his gaze met mine, an electric current bolted through me, arrested my breath.

Go fetch those drinks, he said mentally and pushed me off his lap.

Taken aback by the sudden move, I swayed a little on traitorously unstable legs. He grabbed my hips to steady me, then ran his hands over the curve of my ass, resting them on the exposed skin just under the hem of the dress, right above the back of my knees.

You seem a bit wobbly. His voice was a purr overlaying my thoughts. *Perhaps I should make you crawl*.

Don’t push your luck, I hissed back.

I’m not. He caressed my legs. *I’m pushing you*.

Before I could snap in response, he turned me around, patted my butt, and gently shoved me forward while answering a question Zaquiell had just asked.

Over there, right-hand corner, he said in my mind.

And indeed, the spot he’d indicated held what looked like a small bar, demon bartender included. Azazel could have just called him—or any of his other underlings—over to serve him, but of course sending me to do his bidding was a clear statement, part of our charade.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I carefully crossed the room. Much to my dismay, I *was* a bit wobbly, which is why I walked with deliberate slowness. It didn’t help my nerves that my leisurely stroll through the room drew what felt like extra attention from the demons milling about. Now that I was out of Azazel’s force field of sexual allure, a little self-consciousness crept back into me.

I’d never been comfortable being the focal point in a group, and crowds had always made me slightly twitchy. I often wished I had an ounce of Taylor’s extroversion, her natural ability to command a room. Give her five minutes, and she had any stranger wrapped around her finger, delighting in their attention.

Me? I was glad if I managed an interaction with a person I barely knew without embarrassing myself...and not pull a stunt like that one time I ended a phone call to my doctor’s office with “Goodnight!” at 10 in the morning because my brain hadn’t fully run through the appropriate terms of farewell and picked the right one.

All the way over to the bar, I practiced what I was going to say in my head, just to be sure. Apart from Azazel, Azmodea, Mammon, and Zaquiell, this would be the first other demon I’d actually talk to, and I didn’t want to bungle this up.

I need a drink for Azazel, I thought.

No, that wasn't quite right.

A drink for Azazel, and one for me.

Better.

I'd like a drink for Azazel, and one for me, please.

Best one yet?

But what kind of drink? He hadn't specified. Did they have the same beverages down here as on Earth? My food sure had been familiar.

I fidgeted, almost at the bar now. I felt the eyes of at least half a dozen demons on my back.

The practice sentences tumbled over one another in my mind. I laid my hands on the bar, inhaled deeply and said with full bravado, "I drink a need for Azazel."

Mortified, I closed my eyes. Where was that fucking hole in the ground to swallow me when I needed it?

Glass clinked against glass, and then a male voice said, "Don't we all?"

I opened one eye to peer at the bartender.

The demon raised a blond brow, the hint of a smile on his lips. "The usual for him?"

I gulped. "Sure. And one for me."

The bartender poured from a bottle with golden liquid. "And what would you like? Besides Lord Azazel over there?"

Ha, ha.

Remembering my role in the charade, I plastered on a sufficiently smitten look. "Water will do."

I really didn't need an alcoholic drink in my current condition.

The bartender handed me the two glasses, and I managed to extract myself from the situation without further embarrassment. Yay!

The way back seemed easier. Maybe it was the enchanting rhythm of the music, its beat a primal call to the parts of myself that knew how to walk with a swing in my hips, how to let my movements flow with a touch of sinuous grace. And maybe it was the way Azazel watched me from his spot on the chaise lounge, a hint of feral hunger on his face.

With all the demons in this room—each and every one of them physically enthralling—I was the one who drew his focus, who made him look like he was one step away from pushing me against the wall and—

I took a big gulp from my water. My skin felt too tight, as if stretched thin over nothing but unquenchable desire.

By the time I reached the chaise lounge, I'd drained my glass, and I was still burning up.

Crap.

I was about to take a desperate sip from Azazel's mysteriously golden drink when he grabbed my wrist and pried the glass from my fingers.

"No amrit for you, love," he murmured, and directed me to sit at his feet again.

Amrit?

"Why not?" The question came from Zaqui. "I'd be curious about the effects on her. It's been some time since I've seen it used on a human."

"It doesn't agree with her," Azazel said, his voice casual, not a hint of subterfuge on his face.

"Such a shame."

What is it—amrit? I mentally pushed toward Azazel.

You're familiar with the concept of ambrosia?

I frowned. *The nectar of the gods?*

A bit more complicated than that, but yes. He took a sip from his glass. *Human substances have no effect on us, but amrit does.*

So it's like booze for demons?

He smiled over his glass. *As close as it can get.*

And what does it do to humans?

Unpredictable things. It's not meant to be consumed by mortals.

He laid his hand on my nape, massaging my skin lightly, and a pleasant shiver cascaded down my spine, reigniting the barely banked fire in my core.

Am I, though? I asked, struggling to keep my thoughts from melting. *Still mortal, that is.*

His grasp became a tad more proprietary, and his mental voice brooked no argument. *I'm not willing to test it.*

Any other questions I might have had vanished in the feel of his fingers on my skin, the command in his touch when his hand stroked up and down my throat, tilting back my head. The room spun. I held on to his thigh to keep myself from spinning along with it.

His muscles like steel underneath his pants, he was my anchor when I would have drowned in the magnetic allure of the music, once again a rhythm of such raw sensuality, it felt like a siren's call to sex. The throbbing pulse between my legs—still too exposed, too sensitive—scattered any and all thoughts except how to ease the pressure building inside me.

His fingers caressed my jaw, grazed my lips—and I opened my mouth and sucked his thumb inside. Gave him a taste of the torture I was going through.

Dark power washed over me, a blanket of energy caught between a kiss and a bite.

Liked that, didn't he?

Well, I was in the mood to tease him some more. I'd been squirming under his influence for the past hour—time to turn the tables a bit, let him see I could give as good as I got.

Tilting my head, I rubbed my cheek over his groin, over the still very prominent hardness pressing against his pants. My breath caught when I felt it twitch. More heat pooled low in my core, and I shifted on the cushion, half turning toward him.

His hand now in my hair, his fingers firm in their grasp, creating a delicious pull on my scalp, he stared down at me with eyes of molten lightning.

Was it just my imagination, or did his breath come a little faster?

A thrill coursed through me. I did that. I made him look like this, like he might—*might*—just lose that damned control of his.

And, God, but I wanted him to.

Who was this wanton creature testing the limits of a demon's restraint? I had no idea, but she was definitely in charge right now. Gone was any thought of modesty, forgotten all awareness of anything—and anyone—outside this intimate cocoon of hunger and lust as I fully turned around despite his death grip on my hair.

Kneeling on the cushion in a quiet mockery of supplication, I ran my hands over his thighs, toward his groin...brushing ever so lightly over his cock straining against the fabric of his pants.

His chest heaved. Just a little, but noticeable enough for me, and it added fuel to my fire.

I wanted to singe him with it.

With deliberate slowness and pressure, I repeated my caress, watching as he watched me with hooded eyes. I shifted a bit, an involuntary move to soothe the ache between my legs.

Drums, drums all around me, within me, thumping in my blood, in time with the heavy beat of my heart, the pulse of need in my bones.

I reached for the fastening of his pants, but his hand caught my wrists, held them.

Steel in his gaze as he grabbed my chin with his other hand, tilted my head back, leaned forward and covered my mouth with his.

Everything ground to a halt.

My breath, my heart, my mind, my senses, all stopped and blanked, as if switched off.

His lips on mine, his tongue licking, demanding entrance, and I complied eagerly, hungrily, seeking his taste as if my life depended on it. I moaned into his mouth, shuddered when he nipped at my lower lip.

With my hands still in his grasp, all I could do was fall into his touch, lose myself in his kiss. I barely noticed when he pulled me up to stand—until his mouth forged a path of fire down my throat, over the neckline of my dress...and closed over the peaked tip of my breast.

I gasped, struggled to breathe, fresh moisture pooling between my thighs. His teeth grasping my nipple just so sent arrows of arousal straight down to my clit.

With a deft move, he brought both my arms around to my back, held them there with one hand. The position forced me to arch my spine, pushed my chest even closer to his torturously skilled mouth.

He sucked and nibbled, alternating between breasts. I squirmed in his hold. It was too much, not enough. I wanted to break free, press closer. I needed...needed...

Panting, I rubbed my thighs together, desperate for friction. My fingers flexed, my hands twisting in his grip, unable to help alleviate my suffering.

Ask me. His voice in my head, dark seduction on rumpled sheets.

My breath hitched. I burned.

Ask.

His teeth on my nipple, his other hand sliding over my hips, down the curve of my ass.

My inner muscles clenched in despair.

I closed my eyes. *Please.*

He grabbed my right knee, pulled my leg over his thigh, pushed against my back with the hand holding my wrists. With this single swift move, in the span of a frantic heartbeat, I now half-straddled him, and that poor, over-sensitive, aching spot between my legs met the unforgiving hardness of his thigh.

One shove, in time with his free hand grasping my breast, his mouth now on my neck, teeth nicking skin, and I came apart.

The pressure unraveled in a wave of ecstasy. I undulated in his hold, gasping in his ear until I collapsed against him. His scent surrounded me, potent like a drug where my nose lay buried in his neck.

He let go of my wrists, and I curled my arms in the space between us, still breathing fast.

“Beautiful,” Zaquiell said from somewhere behind me.

Reality intruded on icy feet, in the sounds coming back from outside the vacuum of lust I’d been in, in the returning of my awareness of other people—demons—in the room...the knowledge that Zaquiell sat just a few feet away, having witnessed *everything*.

Heat flared inside me, but this time for wholly different reasons than the desire that had short-circuited my brain before. My fingers curled in Azazel’s shirt. My face was still plastered against the curve of his neck, eyes closed, my hopeless attempt at hiding from the room and my own mortification.

Damn it, hadn’t I sworn not to be embarrassed?

Get yourself together, I sternly told myself. *It was part of the show, all a front.*

Except it wasn't. The very genuineness of my experience just now made me so vulnerable, stripped down and laid bare far more effectively than if I'd actually been naked.

Azazel's hand settled on my head, his fingers playing lightly with the strands of my hair. His other hand stroked down my spine, the move unexpectedly soothing despite the embarrassment searing my nerves.

He'd achieved what he wanted, hadn't he? Well, partially, at least. The hardness nudging my thigh where it lay against his crotch was proof he hadn't gotten off...but maybe that was part of his plan. Considering how stripped down I felt after coming all over him in front of a room full of people, perhaps his preference for control extended to this as well. An orgasm was a sort of loss of control, wasn't it? And maybe this was a side of himself he carefully curated, like so much else in his demeanor.

I wondered what it would take to pierce that kind of armor.

Get up, I berated myself. *Come on, the show's not over yet.*

Any second now Azazel could pull me back into our charade, demand even more of me, and I had to be ready. If he ordered me to sit at his feet again right now and face the room—face Zaquiel—my raw vulnerability would be there for all to see, my walls still cracked, any hint of my self-assured pretense still gone. And wouldn't that be even more devastating than my public orgasm?

I had to get my game face back. I couldn't fucking lie here with my nose buried in the crook of his neck for much longer, couldn't hide from the room and my exposure indefinitely.

And yet, I couldn't move a muscle. My awareness of my situation paralyzed me, and the knowledge of how much I'd let myself go in front of at least a dozen strangers caused tremors of anxiety all through my body.

I tried to stifle my trembling, to no avail. There was no way Azazel didn't feel it.

I tensed, just waiting for him to make a cutting remark about it, to relish how successfully he'd put me back in my place. He'd proven, yet again, how he wielded more power than me. I might have won a single battle by forcing him to bargain and by negotiating for my Earth visits and freedom of movement, but that single advantage of mine was spent, my arsenal depleted. At this rate, I'd never win the war.

And I was so tired of fighting.

I just wanted to crawl under a blanket and hide. Hide from this new life of mine, from having to scratch and claw for the smallest bit of autonomy, from arguing and bickering and still losing, from the prying eyes of everyone in this room who'd just witnessed my own personal Girls Gone Bad spring break type moment of shame...from the demon who held my fate in his hands, held me even now while I unraveled a bit more with every tremor, while tears burned hot behind my eyes, threatening to erode the last bit of dignity I clutched on to.

Goddammit, if I cried right now, right here, I might as well *crawl* out of this room.

Azazel shifted forward without letting me go. The sudden sound of susurrations startled me, and I jerked in his hold. When I opened my eyes and moved my head just so to see what happened, the room had darkened...no, not the room.

Satin black all around me, sliding over my exposed skin in a silken caress, covering me like a blanket.

I blinked, my mind playing catch-up. Were those really...?

Gingerly, I reached out, touched my fingers to the wall of black. Feathers—soft yet strong—with sparks of incipient flames dancing over their shiny onyx. I gasped as pinpricks of heat met my fingertips. Not painful per se, not searing, just...electrifying.

Large enough to wrap around me, Azazel's wings blocked out the room. Blocked *me* from the room. I exhaled, my breath more intimate in this sudden, unexpected cocoon of privacy.

"Azazel," Zaquiell said, clucking his tongue. His voice sounded a bit muffled through the wings.

Azazel's chest rose and fell with his sigh. "What can I say? She likes to play with my feathers, and I do rather enjoy it when she does."

I pulled my hand back from his wing as if burned.

His fingers stroked my hair, and I could have sworn his energy humming over my skin shifted with amusement.

Zaquiell said something else, but all I heard was Azazel's voice in my head. *Take a few minutes to compose yourself.*

It was the gentle note in his tone that startled me almost as much as his wing maneuver did.

You're not going to break apart here. That's not what you do.

He shifted his wing just enough so I could see his face. His hand on my head moved to my jaw, lifted my chin, forced my gaze to his. I swallowed hard, my breath stuttering.

When I withdraw my wings, he continued, his eyes steady on mine, *you'll hold your head up like the tough little human you are.*

His thumb brushed over my lower lip.

You just made every single demon in this room envy my exclusive right to touch you.

His power enveloped me, hot, dark, soothing.

So when you face them, you'll do so knowing you're something they desire, but can't ever have. Show them what it's like to look at something unattainable, love. Move like you own them.

I swallowed again, my throat dry and tight. *Who are you,* I said along the mental line between us, *and what have you done with Azazel?*

Laughter in those eyes of lightning, his energy a thunderstorm caress over my senses. *There now. That's better.*

He looked away, presumably toward Zaquiell, and engaged in some non-business small talk, leaving me thrown off-kilter in an entirely different fashion than before. My head swirled with confusion, my chest tight with too many emotions I couldn't sort through.

His one hand still stroked over my back in lazy moves, and every breath I took filled me with his aroma, intensified by his wings and the small space they created around me. I laid my forehead against his shoulder, closed my eyes and centered myself as best I could.

His words replayed in my mind, and damn if they didn't hit the mark. I *felt* the truth of them with every beat of my heart, settling into my consciousness, shifting my perspective. Bit by bit, the awkward embarrassment vanished, replaced by a growing sense of self-assurance, the confidence of a woman in touch with her sexuality, and not ashamed of it.

Ready? Azazel asked in my head.

Yes.

With another deep breath, shaking off the last of my earlier discomfort, I slowly pushed off his chest while he opened his wings. The cocoon fell away, cooler air rushed in all around me, the sounds once more louder.

Azazel's voice in my mind. *Give them a smile that makes them wonder what you've been up to underneath my wings.*

Picking my nose without anyone seeing me? I replied.

His chest shook. *Let them think your fingers explored something else.*

When I met his eyes briefly, the grin flirting with my mouth wasn't even an act. Taking that

budding amusement in me and directing it outward, I half-turned toward the room, making sure my smile teased with saucy sensuality. I bit my lip for extra effect.

“Well, now,” Zaquiel murmured from behind me, “that is a lovely sight. I’ll have to return home, but I sure would like to take her with me. Tell you what, let me borrow her for a while, and I’ll sweeten the deal with an additional shipment.”

I stiffened, my fingers curling into Azazel’s shirt.

“Lord Zaquiel,” Azazel said calmly while his hand possessively grasped my hair, “I’m sorry to decline your generous offer, but I’m afraid I haven’t had my fill of her.”

“So I see.” Zaquiel’s eyes dropped to Azazel’s crotch in blatant appraisal. “Fair enough. It was worth a try.” One side of his mouth tipped up as he rose to his feet. “Should you tire of her, do let me know.”

Azazel inclined his head, directing me to stand as he got up as well.

Walk behind me, he said in my mind while falling into step alongside Zaquiel. *And remember you’re a snack no one else will get to taste, however much they salivate for it.*

With a deep breath, I loosened my muscles and made sure my steps flowed with languid sensuality, rolling my hips as I sauntered after the two demons.

Snack, I thought, holding my head high. *Snackity, snack.*

Dammit, but that actually helped.

I didn’t glance around the room, but I sensed the gazes of several other demons like licks of heat on my body. When before, their attention would have caused my steps to falter, my shoulders to hunch forward, now it made me walk even taller. I *felt* desirable, and it made all the difference.

I followed Zaquiel and Azazel out of the room, through the hallway and back to the big hall where the inferni had gotten me earlier. Azazel and Zaquiel paused for a moment in front of a set of giant doors and said their goodbyes.

Zaquiel turned to me. “I sure hope to see you again, Zoe. Perhaps in a more intimate fashion.”

I dutifully kept my gaze lowered and bowed deeply, careful not to show my revulsion. Beautiful and attractive he might be, but the casual way in which he regarded me as a commodity to be bartered for raised my hackles. If it weren’t for Azazel’s insistence to keep me to himself, I’d be on my way with Zaquiel now, with no say as to what happened to me.

The giant doors opened, and a blast of heat rushed inside. Daring to raise my gaze just a little, I peered through the doors, blinked at the view of the apocalyptic landscape. So this exit led directly outside, making this hall the entrance to Azazel’s mansion. It made sense, then, that this room was huge and impressive and decorated with statues and weapons and...I frowned, my eyes snagging on one of the 3D artworks on the wall.

Wait a sec— Those weren’t artworks at all.

Blood left my head in a dizzying rush as I took in the details of the *decorations*.

Wings. Black-feathered, large, just like Azazel’s, they hung mounted to the wall like a grotesque, oversized butterfly collection. My mind spinning, I turned on my heels and glanced around the entire hall.

There were dozens of them. Every wall boasted several pairs of wings, fastened to the stone evenly spaced apart, from the bottom upward. My neck hurt from craning it to look up, and I almost lost my balance following the gruesome display until I lost sight of the wings in the gloom of the ceiling.

The clang of the doors closing startled me, and I jerked and wrenched my gaze back down to Azazel, who just now turned to face me. His inscrutable expression morphed into a frown when he

took me in.

“Are those—” I cleared my throat, made my voice a bit steadier. “Are those trophies?”

I gestured at the wings.

He glanced at the wall, then back at me. “Spoils of war,” he said carefully.

He took a step closer, and I involuntarily backed up. His expression darkened.

“From demons you killed?” I sounded breathy even to my own ears. I couldn’t help it. My heart was in my throat, my head too light.

“Some I killed, some I let live,” he said, his voice deceptively calm. “We can survive amputation of limbs. They grow back.” He moved toward me as one would approach a skittish animal. “Eventually.”

My chest heaved with my breaths, too fast, too shallow. I couldn’t keep my eyes from flicking up to the wings. So many of them. So. Many.

“Zoe.” Azazel’s voice was pitched low, and still it made me jump.

I glanced back at him, rattled, and the sight of him only fueled whatever hindbrain response was in charge of my faculties now. His cutting beauty notwithstanding, he was a specter of darkness, his power humming in the air, his eyes too luminous to be human.

With everything else I’d seen and heard recently, somehow this was the aspect that pushed me over. This callous display of intentional cruelty, the barbaric collection of brutal trophies hung on the walls of his entrance hall, a warning in welcome for every visitor, a clear message of his strength and prowess in battle.

My mind just couldn’t compute. Sure, I’d known he was physically stronger, known he was a demon with a likely very different mindset than humans. But I hadn’t truly understood what he was capable of, not until the evidence of it slapped me in the face.

To think...he’d touched me with those hands, the very same ones that could rend someone limb from limb. Not just could, but *did*. Repeatedly. And then he displayed those trophies proudly in his home.

“Zoe,” Azazel said again, but I shook my head, frantically.

“I think—I need to—been a lot today—should go back to—my rooms,” I stammered, giving him a smile that was likely closer to a grimace. “If you’d just...point me in the direction?” I flailed toward the archways in the walls leading deeper into the mansion. “Or maybe...someone can escort me back? Hekesha?”

He followed my retreat as I inched away from him. His form vibrated with restrained power, yet his voice was smooth, with the hint of a playful note in it. “How did you get out of your rooms in the first place?”

Whatever distracting effect he might have been hoping for with his question was completely lost on my frazzled brain. All it did was remind me of how I had—yet again—disobeyed his orders earlier, how I kept riling him up, naively unaware that I was poking at a creature who was ostentatiously capable of dismembering those who crossed him and keeping the body parts for funsies.

I’d been so comfortable around him, relaxed enough to let him pleasure me, let him kiss me... Good God, I’d begun to see him as human, hadn’t I? And all this time, I had no idea of the extent of his otherness, that he really, *truly* could snap me in two with a twist of his hands.

How naive. How dewy-eyed of me.

I should have just stayed locked in my rooms.

Run, run, run, my gecko brain chanted. All I knew, in that moment, was that I needed to put space

between me and him. My instincts screamed at me to flee, and for once, my frontal cortex didn't object.

Azazel took a slow step closer, his features harsh and drawn. "Don't."

With my breath stuck in my lungs, I whirled around and ran.

A muttered curse behind me. My pulse roared in my ears, almost drowning out the swish of movement as he gave chase.

I didn't make it two steps before he caught me.

Arms like steel closed around my upper body as he pulled me back against his chest. My breath left me on a gasp, my heart stuttering.

"Stop," he said in my ear, his voice still at that pitch used to soothe and coax an animal about to bolt.

I *was* more animal than human right now. I couldn't think, couldn't stop, couldn't reason. I was all instinct, no sense left, and so I struggled against his hold like something wild and feral willing to gnaw off my own limb to break free.

"All right, then." Azazel clutched me tighter with one arm around my middle. He laid his other hand on my forehead and whispered, "Sleep."

A push and pop in my mind, then velveteen darkness closed in around my frantic consciousness, as if someone turned off the lights in my head...and my mind along with them.

I fell, and sleep caught me.

CHAPTER 10

I WOKE IN SLOW INCREMENTS, MY SENSES SENDING MY MIND MESSAGES LONG BEFORE MY THOUGHTS returned to interpret them. Softness underneath me. Gloom surrounding me, broken up by flashes of distant light. A scent tickled my nose, sank into my skin, familiar and foreign and so, so good. I inhaled deeply. Leather and fire and dark spices. It was all around me, but especially concentrated on the soft surface underneath my head.

Pressing my nose into it, I stretched out, languidly moving my body like a cat shifting into an even more relaxed position. My skin slid along what felt like silk sheets, and my mind finally decided to come back and compute a little.

I opened my eyes to the next flash of light conveniently blinding me, but after a few seconds, my sight adjusted to the semi-darkness. A bed. I was lying on a bed, and I fucking knew this bed. I'd picked my overly revealing dress off this very mattress earlier, under the watchful, hungry gaze of its owner.

I was upright within a second, my eyes darting around the room. No sign of Azazel in the shadows anywhere. Just me, in his bed, curled into his sheets—and his scent—still wearing that damned dress. Of course, as flowy skirts are wont to do, the loose material around my hips was now bunched up, leaving me disconcertingly exposed from my waist down—exhibit A of why I hated nightgowns. I grimaced as I realized I'd wiggled all over his bed half naked.

The lightning outside illuminated the room for a second, and my gaze caught on something lying next to me. A pile of clothes—a fresh pair of jeans, a tank top...and *underwear*. Well, well.

But not just that. Something gleamed in the faint light coming from the window, the spark of a jewel. I reached out and my fingers grazed chilled metal. Gingerly, I grasped the object, held it up and turned it to the window. The next flash lit up the dagger's sheath, made the black jewels set in it spark to life.

I carefully drew the blade out of its protective case and held my breath. Almost as long as my lower arm, it shone in the low light, its dark metal iridescent. Beautiful.

And sharp. I tested the edge, and even though I barely pushed, my fingertip came away wet. Sucking on the small cut, I sheathed the dagger again.

This...this was no accident. He wouldn't leave this blade lying around here just like that, not with me in the room, right next to it. And a pile of my clothes laid out for me to find.

No, this was deliberate. He'd just given me a weapon.

Frowning, I scooted off the bed and quickly donned the fresh clothes. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but one thing was clear—I really, really did not want to face him right now.

My panic from before had abated, yes, and my mind wasn't as jumbled anymore. I couldn't shake

the sense of dread, though, the insidious grasp of primal fear lurking behind my more rational thoughts.

All it took to cause a new shiver of trepidation to skitter down my spine was a flash of memory of those wings pinned to the wall.

There, right there, was my thundering heartbeat again.

Yeah, no, I needed to just get out of here, find my way back to my rooms and hole up there for...however long it would take to come to terms with...this.

Ironic, wasn't it, that I'd fought so hard to break free of those rooms, and now all I wanted was to retreat to their relative safety. *You sure had it right, Alanis.*

With the song *Ironic* playing on repeat in my mind—thanks to that weird quirk of mine that would get me an ear worm of a random song by only thinking of *one* word from the lyrics—I crept toward the door to the next room and opened it as if neutralizing a bomb.

The sitting room loomed empty in the low light of the torches, the door in the opposite wall cracked open about an inch. A voice floated over, muted but familiar. Azazel said something, and someone whose voice I didn't recognize replied. I couldn't make out all the words, but it seemed he was receiving some sort of report about his estate.

Damn. The exit to the hallway was in that very room. To get out of here, I'd have to walk past him. *And* ask him for an escort to my suite.

No way would I brave the hallways by myself again, not with the memory of the inferni's teeth sinking into my flesh still vivid in my mind. If it weren't for those blasted beasts, I could simply summon an archway—thanks to the convenient dagger with which Azazel supplied me—and sneak out of here with my demonic spouse none the wiser.

As it was, the threat of the inferni hunting me down again kept me from venturing out alone. However stubborn I could be, I wasn't too stupid to live.

Well, nothing for it—I had to let him know I was up and moving and ready to go back to my rooms. With any luck, he'd have someone else escort me right back, maybe the demon he was talking to. After all, wasn't that what he'd wanted? Me, staying in my rooms, with as little interaction between us as possible? He was about to get his wish.

I turned back to the bed and swiped the dagger off the mattress. A gift was a gift. I wasn't trained in wielding blades, and I didn't know how much good it would do me if I had to use it in self-defense—I had a sword against the inferni, and they overran me in seconds—but I wasn't going to just leave this beautiful stabby thing here.

I walked out into the sitting room, stopping a few feet away from the door leading into whatever parlor or some such room lay beyond. My stomach tightened, my muscles tensing.

The other demon broke off mid-sentence, the following silence oddly attentive. I frowned at the little splashes coming from the room, like water dripping and gurgling in a fountain.

"Leave," Azazel said quietly.

"My lord." Sounds of retreat, a door opening and shutting.

Taking a deep breath, I stalked into the room.

Azazel stood at what appeared to be indeed a fountain, his fingers idly playing through the agitating water. His broad frame held a hum of tension, a bite to his energy as it misted darkly about his form. The air seemed to hush around him, as if holding its breath. In awe—or fear.

"Sleep well?" His voice was a silken murmur, his expression guarded as he looked at me.

Yeah, about that. I so didn't appreciate the little trick he pulled on me earlier, and the reminder of how easily he could infiltrate my mind only reinforced the urge to get away from him.

“If you would be so kind,” I said with as much politeness as I managed while my anxiety grasped for control, “to have someone escort me to my rooms. Please.”

Something harsh and dark flitted across his expression, there and gone again. He took a step toward me, and I moved back a little, even without conscious thought.

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but his voice was a sensual purr. “Didn’t you want my attention?” With the kind of lithe grace of a great cat, he closed the distance between us. “You have it now.”

My back bumped into the wall. “I thought you wanted to ignore me,” I whispered. “That’s fine by me, you know.”

His power buzzed in the inches separating us, as tangible as a physical touch. An image of the torn-off wings flashed before my eyes. I sucked in a harsh breath, and my gecko brain eagerly reached for the reins, instincts kicking in once more.

He clucked his tongue, his voice a soothing murmur. “None of that now.”

Grasping my right wrist with one hand, he lifted it and pulled the sheath off the dagger I still clutched. With his hand wrapped around my hand holding the blade, he brought the knife up to his throat, laid it against his skin.

“This dagger is forged in Hell,” he said softly. “As such, it is one of the few weapons that can make me bleed.” His eyes swirled silver as they held me spellbound. “And kill me.”

My heart raced, bright spots danced in my vision. Breath coming too fast, I was glad I was leaning against the wall for purchase. One slice, and I could slit his throat. My hand trembled ever so slightly.

“Now,” he murmured, leaning in just a little, putting pressure on the blade, “can we talk?”

I stared at him for a moment, then gave him a tiny, shaky nod.

“Good.” His easy smile was so at odds with the fact he had a dagger against his throat. Perplexing man. Demon. Whatever.

“I have never touched you with the intent to harm, and I never will.”

I swallowed. “Your manifold threats sure said different.”

“Like your contemplations of how to eviscerate me?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“That was just a figure of speech.”

“As was your pondering of where best to stab me, or how your hands would feel wrapped around my neck, I’m sure.”

I inhaled sharply. “You bastard.” The insult tumbled out of my mouth before any fearful instinct could stop it. My hand tightened on the hilt of the dagger. “You’ve been reading my mind?”

“There’s a difference,” he said with remarkable calm, considering he was riling up someone one second away from giving him a bloody necklace, “between intrusive reading and picking up aggressive projections.”

I opened my mouth, closed it. Shook my head. “What?”

“You need to learn shielding.”

“My *thoughts*?” Horror speared through me. My grip on the dagger slipped a little. “In that room, with Zaquiel... Did I—could he...?”

“I shielded you.”

“You...” I blinked, closed my eyes for a moment. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” When I looked at him again, his eyes had warmed, his focus sharpened. “I’ll teach you how.”

I stared at him for the span of a few heartbeats. “You? Will train me? Why?”

“Do you want me to keep picking up your stray thoughts?”

I numbly shook my head.

“Then you need to learn to put up shields.”

I got that much, sure. Didn't explain why he offered to teach me himself instead of pushing me off to Azmodea or someone else.

“Like I said,” he murmured, “you have my attention.”

“Get out of my head.”

“I'm not even in it, love. And unlike with auditory signals, I can't block your thoughts by covering my ears.”

“How much—” My hand holding the dagger shook. “How much have you caught?”

“When, exactly?”

Good grief. I closed my eyes, too mortified to hold his gaze as my mind helpfully flashed back through all of our interactions and the many thoughts I had about him...a lot of them unruly and way too revealing.

The sound of fabric rustling made me snap my eyes open again, only to stop short at the sight of him rolling up his right sleeve and thoughtfully regarding his forearm as he flexed his muscles.

“Arm porn,” he mused. “I can see it.”

My face burned like a supernova, and my hand holding the dagger trembled...slipped.

Azazel hissed low as the blade slit through his skin, leaving a trail of bright red.

With a yelp, I dropped the knife. I covered my mouth with both hands, my heart skipping a beat. Or a dozen.

Blood poured out of the wound like a morbid waterfall of red. A wet gurgle bubbled up from his throat. His eyes were wide, his features slack. He sag-leaned forward until his forehead met mine and braced himself with his hands against the wall on either side of me.

“Oh, God, I'm sorry,” I whispered, my thoughts racing.

I killed him. Good Lord, I killed him. He was bleeding out all over me. My hands shook as I pressed them against his chest, trying foolishly to steady him. I wouldn't be able to hold him upright. He was going to collapse right there, his blood painting his tunic in a gruesome crimson batik.

He'd given me the means to hurt him, and I'd gone ahead and slit his throat.

“I'm sorry,” I wailed. “I didn't mean to. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Oh, God...”

His lips moved, but no sound came.

“What?” I whispered.

He shifted his head, brought his mouth to my ear. “Azazel,” he muttered.

I stilled.

“If you feel the need to invoke a higher being,” he continued, his voice turning into a purr, “it should be me.”

That. Stinking. Rat. Bastard.

With a groan of angry frustration, I pushed against his chest. It shook under my hands. A sound much like wheezing close to my ear, his breath huffing against my neck.

That did it. His silent laughter made me snap. The horror of thinking I killed him veered straight into fury, and I slapped the hell out of his shoulders, his chest, his arms, punctuating each smack with a growled, barely coherent insult.

He let me. For a good thirty seconds, he allowed me to vent my anger while he—irritatingly—kept on half wheezing, half chuckling close to my ear.

“Stop.” *Slap.* “Laughing.” *Slap.* “You.” *Slap.* “Jerk.” *Slap.*

One more choked chuckle, then— “All right.”

He withdrew enough that I could see his face, the quicksilver lightning of his eyes...the unusually

open, unguarded expression as he considered me with such intent focus, it rattled me.

“The dagger,” he said, his voice soft yet serious, “can indeed kill me. That wasn’t a lie. You would have to cut off my head, though, which takes more pressure than a slip of a hand.”

Without bending to pick it up, he held the blade from one second to the next, and pushed it—hilt first—into my hand again. He positioned my hold such that the tip of the knife pointed at a spot somewhat left on his chest.

“If you want to incapacitate me, stab me here. With enough force, the blade will pierce my heart and stop it...for some time.”

I stared at the dagger pointing all too eagerly toward that vulnerable spot, then met his gaze with horror-widened eyes, my anger all but fizzled out again. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I do not...” He paused, muscles feathering along his jaw. “...wish for you to fear me.”

I swallowed hard, my throat too dry. “Why do you care?”

Wouldn’t he prefer me cowering scared in my rooms?

Another long pause, during which he appeared to struggle for words. “You’re quiet when you’re afraid,” he said eventually. His voice low and rough, he added, “I don’t like you quiet.”

“Oh.”

That was all I got out. His uncharacteristically open answer threw me for a loop, and I was still spinning when he cupped my cheek, caressed my jaw with his thumb. My lips parted on a soft exhale, and his gaze dropped to my mouth, his features drawing tight with hunger.

And yet, he waited.

For me to ask him? If he thought I’d beg him again, he—

“May I?”

My internal diatribe screeched to a halt. I blinked. “What?”

“Kiss you.”

I stared at him, my thoughts jumbled, my hand still holding that damn dagger. My lips prickled as if already feeling his touch, and I licked them absent-mindedly. The power emanating from him darkened, sharpened, his frame vibrating with tension.

And I knew, without a sliver of doubt, that if I told him no, he’d take that pent-up power, choke it down, and leave me be.

Outside our charade in front of others, he wouldn’t take what wasn’t offered.

“And I wouldn’t break you,” he murmured. “I may sever the wings of the demons who sought to kill me, and I am not going to pretend I didn’t enjoy it.”

His energy stroked over my senses, made me shiver.

“But I will never lay a hand on you with violent intent.” He grasped the dagger—on the end of the blade—and squeezed. Blood welled from between his fingers. “That is my vow.”

“Not the palm!” I squealed and let go of the knife.

His brows drew together. “What?”

“You don’t draw blood from your palm. Too many nerves! And it takes forever to hea—”

I broke off when he opened his red-smeared hand to reveal two cuts...which rapidly closed before my eyes.

I pursed my lips. “Well, um, never mind. I guess.” Glancing at his neck, I added, “So is your throat...?”

He summoned a towel, wiped the blood from his hand and then from his neck as well. Clean, unblemished skin greeted my eyes, not even a scar left over from the cut.

“You can still kiss it better,” he said, tapping the sinewy column of his throat. “It feels a bit...”

tender.”

The sly slant to his mouth belied the earnestness of his tone.

I leaned fully back against the wall. “Does it now?”

“Mh-hm.”

Every second ticking by hummed with energy, the space between us charged with the kind of tension that made your blood pump faster...and prickle with the knowledge of hovering on a threshold of sorts. A decision loomed, bold and brash, frightening in its consequences.

I could take this step now, open the door for something more, and enjoy what he was offering. Or, I could turn him down, retreat, and keep things the way they were—with me being so damn lonely I started talking to a toilet.

Yeah, no, it wasn’t even a decision at all.

He raised a brow, amusement flickering over his face. “Did you really name your toilet after—”

“Hush now,” I said.

Determination filling my veins, I raised my hand, curled my fingers into his shirt and slowly pulled. He followed my cue and leaned forward, bracing one palm against the wall again as he bent down a little.

Our breaths mingled in the space between. His scent—now mixed with the metallic tang of blood—filled my nose with every inhale, a dark seduction on its own. I rose on my toes, held his gaze until the last, until I was too close, my nose brushing against his jaw. Pausing, I exhaled, my heart hammering in my chest.

Even though he stood perfectly, inhumanly still, he didn’t *feel* passive. More like a predator lying in wait, luring its prey closer with the pretense of motionless silence.

Stubble rasped over my lips, the heat of his skin searing my mouth as I pressed it against his throat.

The faintest tremor went through his frame.

Parting my lips, I touched the tip of my tongue to the pulsing vein along the column of his neck, licked a short line up toward his jaw. The slight aroma of sweat and the fading echo of iron richness tingled on my tongue. I pressed my lips once more to the spot where the dagger had drawn blood, then withdrew and came down from my tiptoes.

A lightning storm raged in his eyes, almost concealed by his half-closed lids. Smoke tickled my nose, and I turned my head to the side, raised my brows at the sight of his hand against the wall. The surrounding area was blackened, tentacles of soot spearing out from his palm and fingers.

I turned back to him, softly sucked in air. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

It hurt to look at him for long, the ethereal cut of his features too intense, too raw and refined at the same time. I focused on his lips, on the perfect curve of his mouth, just full enough to be a sensual promise.

“You may,” I whispered.

He exhaled roughly, cupped my cheek and tilted my head back just so. A brush of his thumb over my lower lip, his breath a hot brand on my skin, and then his mouth moved over mine.

I’d expected a possessive claiming, a harsh explosion of passion in the meeting of lips and tongues and teeth. A growl-turned-kiss.

What I got was a dance of seduction in sinfully light steps, a lure for my senses with touches that teased, dared...coaxed. His lips would graze mine, ever so lightly, barely more than his breath whispering over my mouth, and he’d withdraw as soon as I pushed for more, until I would chase him

in his retreat.

It turned my blood to lava.

With a snarl, I grabbed the back of his neck, yanked him closer and claimed his mouth with the unbridled force I wished he would use. He laughed—*laughed*—into the kiss, lifted me with his hands on my waist and shoved me against the wall.

Yes.

Without missing a beat, I wrapped my legs around his hips, and—good God—the pressure on my core when he pushed forward, pressed his entire body against mine. Diabolically divine.

I trembled, gasped into his mouth as he devoured me lick by torturous, delicious lick, his hands on my thighs, fingers digging into my jeans. I burned, burned, burned.

The astringent aroma of smoke in the air, scratching my lungs.

With a sigh, he broke the kiss, set me down and stepped back. I frowned and wanted to protest—

“Were these,” he said, waving at my jeans, “your favorite pants?”

I glanced down and jerked back. The dark blue fabric sported the smoldering outline of a handprint on the outer side of either thigh. A few blackened threads barely held the material together, with skin peeking through the gaps.

Skin that didn’t show a single burn mark, contrary to my ruined jeans.

I made a sound of dismay and glared at him. “Did you do that on purpose?”

He had the good grace to look sheepish. “I can burn off the rest and turn them into shorts?” he offered.

I raised a brow, poked a finger through the soot-stained holes. “Why didn’t my skin burn?”

“I would guess,” he said, crouching down in front of me, his hands encircling my thighs right over the seared marks, “you’re fireproof.”

Flames ignited from his fingers, closed a ring around my jeans legs until the material below fell down to my ankles, leaving me standing there in short shorts with Azazel’s hands still resting on my now mostly naked thighs.

I inhaled harshly, grabbed his shoulders to balance myself on wobbly legs. I studied the skin where he’d just singed away my jeans, and wouldn’t you know it—not a single burn, the skin not even reddened.

“How?” I pressed out, my chest tight, the skin where he touched me aflame in a completely different way.

“The bond.” His fingers stroked up and down on my thighs, just a few inches below the line where my legs met my hips. Shivers raced up from his touch. He looked up then, and the sight of him crouching before me, molten lightning in his eyes as he caught my gaze, caused my stomach to tighten, my breasts growing heavy. “Some of my powers may have transferred to you.”

It was hard to remember how to form a sentence, what with my blood eagerly pumping in other places than my brain right now. “Will I sprout wings?”

“No. Only full-blood demons have them. You may—” he leaned in and kissed the inside of my thigh, and I all but liquefied “—be somewhat close to a half-blood in powers.”

“Half-blood?” I breathed, my fingers curling into his shoulders.

“The offspring of a demon and a human. They don’t have wings and are weaker than demons, but they have abilities that humans lack.”

It was unfair how articulate he was compared to my whut-R-verds trouble, courtesy of the fact he was a few inches away from burying his face in my crotch. I didn’t have to press my thighs together or wiggle to feel the slick wetness drenching my panties.

He inhaled deeply and his fingers tightened on my legs. Achingly slow, he leaned forward again and placed another kiss on my other thigh, then rose to his feet in a fluid motion. His expression looked almost pained, and I'd lie if I said it wasn't gratifying to see him affected like that.

His voice was a bit roughened when he spoke. "I'm going to take a shower and change—" he tapped the collar of his shirt where his blood stained the dark gray fabric "—and then I'll take you to the kennels." He paused, leaned in and sniffed at my neck. Straightening again, he added, "In fact, you'll need to wash up too. They won't be friendly if they smell blood on you."

He brushed a finger over my collarbone and showed me the tiny red smear on his fingertip. Apparently some of his blood had sprayed me when I accidentally slit his throat.

I grimaced at the reminder, then shook my head to clear it. "Wait—kennels?"

He was already through the door to the next room. "We're going to visit the hounds."

"Why?"

I hurried to catch up as he crossed the sitting room and entered his bedroom—where I stopped short at the sight of him shrugging out of his shirt. I'd never get used to that visual. Rippling muscles, corded sinews, strength poured into a frame of pure power. It was enough to render a girl temporarily stunned and frozen.

Or rather, molten on the inside and barely held together by skin that was rapidly catching fire.

I must have uttered a sound of helpless appreciation because Azazel glanced at me as he threw his shirt in a corner, his eyes sparking.

"You're welcome to join me in the shower," he said with a purr that echoed the pulsing need between my legs.

I just stared. Words fled me.

His hands went to the fastening of his pants, popped open the top button.

My breath got stuck in my lungs.

The next button gave. The trail of dark hair became more visible. I remembered, all too vividly, that he didn't wear anything underneath these pants.

Sweat broke out on my skin. I licked my suddenly dry lips.

Another button. More bronzed skin, dusted with black hair.

I grabbed the doorjamb to steady myself. I could have left—my legs would still work well enough to let me wobble out—but I stood rooted to the spot, unable to tear my eyes away from the provocative display in front of me.

No more buttons left, only the flaps of his pants as he pushed them down...and freed the hard length of his cock.

I made an undignified sound somewhere between a whimper and a moan. I'd never found dicks to be especially aesthetically pleasing, but this piece of hardware right there might just change my mind.

More than that, though, the sight of his erection jutting up from the patch of close-cropped black hair caused shivers of primal lust to course through me. Instinctive, reflexive, like the unconscious, uncontrollable response of saliva pooling in your mouth when you saw and smelled your favorite treat, raw craving pulsed low in my core as I stared at his cock, and my inner muscles clenched as if in anticipation.

Azazel stepped out of his pants, but made no move toward me. "Whenever you want to do something about that look on your face," he said, grasping his length and squeezing hard, "come find me."

And with that he turned and prowled into the bathroom, giving me a breathtaking view of his taut ass in motion.

I exhaled roughly, my chest heaving, and slid down the doorjamb until my butt hit the floor. The movement made the firm material of my jeans press against my swollen, throbbing, intimate flesh, and I gasped at the tingles of need shooting outward from that oversensitive spot.

The sound of running water came from behind the closed door to the bathroom.

Rubbing my face with both hands, I tried to sort my thoughts. Or, you know, have any thoughts at all instead of just primitive urges.

The desire wreaking havoc on my system and insistently pulsing in my clit demanded relief, and it would be oh-so-easy to get up and walk through that door and let that hunk of demon take care of my need.

But I also knew that if I did join him, I'd have him inside me in a matter of minutes. I pursed my lips and squinted. Okay, more like seconds.

And as much as I was thirsting right now, I wasn't sure I was ready. There was that pertinacious part of my mind reminding me that only a few hours ago, I'd been ready to strangle the fuck out of him...because he'd consistently treated me as negligible.

But now he'd apparently changed his mind, and I didn't quite know what to do with his sudden attention. What to think of his overt interest, how to handle that much...Azazel.

Not to mention that crossing this line with him had quite a few implications. This wasn't the same as scratching an itch with a guy I'd swiped right on and could walk away from the next morning. Things could get really, *really* messy here.

All this, and more, kept me sitting on the floor with unfulfilled need and the desperate wish to be able to summon objects like my confounding demon husband could. I'd have had my trusted electric friend in hand minutes ago and taken the edge off in no time.

I startled at the sound of the door opening. Azazel strolled out of the bathroom, rubbing his hair with a towel, steam fogging the air behind him. He was still gloriously, temptingly naked, and I averted my eyes as I scrambled to a stand, lest the sinfully seductive visual test my resolve.

I made to hurry past him when he blocked my path with one arm against the doorway to the bathroom. My breath came out as half wheeze, half choked-off groan. His body heat hummed against my skin even with a few inches separating us.

"I think you might need this," he said silkily, and pressed something in my hand.

I recognized it before glancing down—I'd held this many a time, after all, my palm and fingers intimately familiar with its shape and size.

"Just how far," I managed to get out, "does the range of my 'stray thoughts' go?"

"A few feet. Not far enough for me to pick them up from the bathroom." Leaning down, he brushed his lips over my ear and muttered, "But I'm quite pleased I guessed right."

He removed his arm blockade and walked past me. Face aflame, I fled into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. My hand tightened around the vibrator.

Welp, I wasn't one to waste an opportunity.

That thing was waterproof for a reason.

CHAPTER 11

TEN MINUTES, ONE SHOWER, AND A SATISFYING ORGASM LATER, I WALKED BACK INTO THE BEDROOM, the huge fluffy towel securely wrapped around my heated body.

Azazel—now fully dressed in what seemed to be fighting leathers, and damn if that didn't make him even hotter—looked up from his lounging position on one of the armchairs in the corner of the bedroom. His eyes flashed, raking me from head to toe, and one corner of his mouth curved up.

Wait, I knew that look. He was up to somethi—

He raised his right hand, palm up, index finger extended as if about to beckon me to him..and a pair of lace panties materialized, dangling daintily from said beckoning finger.

He crooked it. The panties swayed with the motion.

I scoffed. “Really?”

A quick once-over of the room confirmed my suspicion—he hadn't yet summoned a new set of clothes.

“Unless you'd like to go without again?” He appeared far too delighted at the idea.

Yeah, right.

I marched up to him and snatched the panties from his finger. And because my spiteful streak was back in full force, instead of retreating to the bathroom, I proceeded to step into the pair right there in front of him and pulled them up underneath the towel without revealing any extra skin. Years of having to change on the beach sans a modesty screen except my towel had taught me well.

He made a soft sound of disappointment and summoned the matching bra.

“Did you memorize my entire closet?”

A sensual smile snuck onto his face. “Only the interesting bits.” He tilted his head and studied me. “I bet you can't put this one on too without losing the towel.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Challenge accepted.”

After securing the knot above my breasts, I slung the bra underneath the towel, around my waist, fastened it by touch alone, turned it around so the cups would hold my girls—all done either by reaching through the overlapping ends of the towel without opening it, or feeling through the fabric—and then pulled the straps out from under the towel one by one, wiggling my arms into each. With a snap, I brought the straps in position and put my hands on my hips, flipping my hair over my shoulder.

“Color me impressed,” Azazel muttered, his voice rich and seductive like dark chocolate.

“Pants?” I asked, ignoring the flip in my stomach.

A pair of black jeans appeared in his outstretched hand.

Easy peasy. I had them on within a few seconds, the towel still secured around my chest.

He held out a black tank top with wide shoulder straps, one of my favorites. The crew neckline

emphasized my chest just right, and the material hugged my curves perfectly.

"I expect this one will be trickier to put on," he said with a grin.

He was right, of course. A T-shirt would have been the safer bet, especially one with a wider cut. I could have easily put that on without losing the towel too early, but with a skin-tight tank like this... Eh.

I shrugged, turned and slipped my arms into the tank, pulling it over my head too. Loosening the knot, I let the towel fall to the floor around my feet at the same time I dragged the tank down over my chest. Adjusting the material around my waist, I faced Azazel again.

He was leaning back in the chair, his heated gaze fixed on me. His sprawling posture and the rugged leather armor made him look like a barbarian king observing his latest conquest.

"I never knew," he said in a velvet murmur, "how enticing a reverse strip-tease could be."

My lips twitched with the urge to curve into a smirk.

He rose to his feet, his massive frame dwarfing me, and yet the shiver tingling down my spine knew nothing of fear. I craned my neck to meet his gaze, and he brushed a finger over my lips.

"Although," he purred, "I'd much rather watch you do the opposite."

My cheeks heated at the mental image his words evoked, warmth flooding decidedly sensitive places in my body. "Like you could sit still long enough to not just burn my clothes off."

The corners of his eyes crinkled, his power a pulse in the air. "Challenge accepted."

Desire was a siren call in my blood, still I stepped back and cleared my throat. "So, the hounds. Why are we going to see them again?"

"So you can pick one," he replied, accepting my change of topic without calling me on it.

"Pick one?"

"To keep."

My brows drew together. "As a pet?"

"Pet, guard, guide..." He waved a hand. "You'll need protection if you're to explore my house alone. A hound will be enough of a deterrent to the inferni and anything else that might see you as a snack."

I didn't miss the double meaning in that last word.

"Okay..." I bit my lip. "But...does it, like, have to be a hellhound? I'm really not that much of a dog person."

He raised a brow.

"It's just—" I flailed. "Dogs are so slobbery. The ones I met all tried to lick me. Like—*everywhere*."

He crossed his arms, raised one hand to his chin and shook his head, his eyes wide. "Can't imagine why."

I cast him a sidelong glance. "What about that hellcat in my rooms? Can't I have that one as my guard? It looks big and vicious enough."

He sighed. "Mephistopheles is...too capricious for guard duty."

"*Mephistopheles*?" I stared at him in disbelief. "Seriously? Like that demon in Goethe's *Faust*?"

"He's been around longer than that poet." He shrugged. "If I remember correctly, he got bored here and visited Earth for a while, which is how he must have inspired the character's name. He was quite smug when he came back. Took a century for him to not bring it up at every opportunity."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "The hellcat that spit on me played muse to a world-class poet, sure, sure." Deep breath in, deep breath out. "Anything else?"

"He chewed off van Gogh's ear."

My hand fell limply at my side. “Figuratively?”

“Literally.”

I blinked rapidly. “And you let him *stay in my rooms*?”

“He can’t hurt you.”

“Why? Didn’t you just say he was unreliable?”

“He’s bound by oath not to harm the master of this house, and that applies to you as well, courtesy of our...marriage.”

I narrowed my eyes. “He offered to scratch me.”

“He has an odd sense of humor.”

I gave him my best side-eye.

“Here,” he said, and held out a leather jacket. “Put this on too.”

I took the jacket and regarded it, noting its style and design were closer to an armored, long-sleeve tunic. “This is not mine.”

“No. I had it made it for you. The pups can be a bit...rambunctious.”

“You mean bitey?”

“If they bit you,” he said in his most patient tone, “they could cleave off your arm, whether you wore leather or not.”

“Good to know,” I squeaked.

“This is to protect you from their claws should they jump up on you.”

“*Come to Hell, they said,*” I muttered. “*Enjoy the local wildlife, they said.*”

“Pray you won’t ever meet the real wildlife. Hounds and cats aren’t it.”

“Is it dragons?” I shrugged into the tunic-jacket and shoved my feet into the boots Azazel materialized. “Please tell me it’s not dragons.”

His answer was a smirk as he turned toward the doors to the balcony, pulled them open and walked out. I followed him into the lightning-lit twilight. Heat billowed against me, and I gasped. How was I supposed to survive even five minutes in this oven, dressed like I was? Pulling at my collar, I tried to catch my breath, sweat already dripping down my neckline.

“C’mere.” Azazel grasped my arm, pushed up my sleeve and laid his fingers on my wrist.

A welcome, surprising chill shot up from his touch, spread through my body as if my veins had been injected with non-toxic coolant. I sucked in air, closed my eyes in bliss and moaned. “Oh, God, thank you.”

He tsked, still holding my wrist, his thumb rubbing over my pulse point. “Who?”

Clearing my throat, I slanted a glance at him. “You’re really hung up on that, aren’t you?”

“I’m a fan of giving credit where credit is due. So when I’m the one making you moan, it better be my name on your lips.”

I pressed my mouth into a tight line to keep from grinning, looked up at him from beneath my lashes, fluttered them for effect, and breathed, “Oh, Azazel.”

He uttered a sound somewhere between a grunt and a laugh. “We’ll work on that.”

A whoosh, his wings erupting from his back in all their fire-licked glory.

Putting his hands on my waist, he pulled me close and lifted me a little. “Hold on.”

Instinctively, I slung not just my arms around his neck, but my legs around his hips as well. His one hand came to rest on my butt, his other arm wrapped around my back, holding me fast.

My face was level with his, cheek on cheek, the stubble on his jaw scratching over my skin. The scent of leather, fire, and that enticing spice—strong now that he was fresh out of the shower—teased my nose, made my lips tingle with the impulse to feel him. It was all I could do not to lean forward an

inch and bury my face in the crook of his neck again...where the temptation to lick and taste him would do me in.

“Anytime you feel like using your tongue on me, love,” he muttered, “feel free to do just that.” His hot breath on my ear, making me shiver. “Anywhere you want to.”

My thighs tightened around his hips, wayward need sparking to life in my core. “We better start those shielding lessons soon.”

The thump of his wings drowned out his quiet laugh as we shot into the air. My stomach did a somersault.

“Do not shriek into my ear again,” he said.

“Fly better, and I won’t,” I hissed back.

“Maybe you just need a distraction.”

He banked abruptly, and my insides turned over. Before I could get a scream out, however, his mouth covered mine, and whatever high-pitched shriek had been building in my throat was swallowed by a kiss that made my stomach flutter with something entirely different than a sharp turn in the air.

I didn’t even notice when he landed. By the time he broke the kiss, we were on solid ground, his wings retracted, my mind foggy with lust, and my thighs squeezing him for all he was worth.

“See?” he said as he disentangled himself from my grip and let me slide down his front. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

I made a noncommittal sound and held on to him for the seconds it took my legs to stop being wobbly.

“Lord Azazel,” someone said from behind me. “How may I serve you?”

I turned and eyed the demon who’d spoken.

He straightened from his respectful bow, long black hair sliding over his right shoulder. The hair on the left side of his head was close-cropped. Sharp brows rose over what appeared to be dark blue eyes, set in a face of rough-hewn pale beauty.

“Hael,” Azazel said, stepping forward and nodding at the demon. “I require a pup, not yet fully grown but trained.”

“Certainly, my lord.” Hael’s gaze flicked to me for a moment before focusing on Azazel again. “Any other special preferences?”

“Show me your most protective ones.” He glanced at me then added, “Their temper should be mellow.”

Hael inclined his head and made as if to turn and walk ahead, when Azazel snapped his fingers and the other demon paused.

“They need to be extremely obedient.” A brief pause, then, “And perhaps not too prone to licking.”

I bit my lip to rein in my grin at the expression on the other demon’s face.

“Of course, my lord,” was all Hael said before he beckoned for us to follow him into the squat building.

Attached to the outside of the massive structure of Azazel’s main fortress, the kennel building itself was the size of a mall. We walked through enormous, sturdy double doors into the semi-darkness of a hallway that could have been a tunnel allowing for a multi-lane freeway.

The strong smell of canines hung in the air, and deep-throated barking sounded from somewhere farther ahead. Every now and then one of the soul-crushing howls rose and fell in the distance.

The hairs on my arms stood up, my heart racing like mad.

I needed to get my shit together. If these beasts were anything like real dogs—or wolves—they would take one sniff of me and smell my fear.

Deep breaths, I told myself. *Think of happy puppies. Happy, cuddly puppies.*

Azazel made a sound close to a suppressed laughing snort, and I glared at his back.

Here, he said in my mind, tapping a spot on his side. *If you stab me here, it will tickle.*

My hand flexed around the hilt of the dagger strapped to my hips.

He smiled as we rounded a corner and stopped in front of a large pen, secured with a thick metal fence, its bars reminiscent of the kind of enclosure necessary to keep elephants in check.

“Please wait here,” Hael said. “I will fetch the pups.”

Azazel nodded as the other demon left.

“Do you have a favorite hound?” I asked Azazel. “You know, one that’s more your pet than the others.”

His smile warmed, his gaze on the pen. “Chaos. He used to be Azmodea’s.”

“The one you stole from her?”

He cast me a narrow-eyed look. “I didn’t steal anything. He chose me. It’s not my fault if my sister doesn’t have her hounds under control and one of them happens to like me better than her.”

I pursed my lips. “Mh-hm. You lured him, didn’t you? Bribed him with treats or something.”

“Unfounded accusations.” The corners of his mouth twitched upward. “No proof, no crime.”

A door on the other side of the pen opened, and several large shadows streamed into the enclosure. Their baying shook the walls, rattled my bones, and I grabbed Azazel’s arm without thought.

“They’re just excited,” he muttered, his voice barely audible over the noise the hounds made.

“Is that—do they—” My hand shook as I gestured in the direction of the beasts. “Three heads?”

“All the better to chew up couches with.”

I stared in horror at the hellborn canines, each of them as big as a lion. “Those are puppies?”

“They’re about two thirds of an adult’s size.”

A muffled squeak escaped me.

After their initial dash around the pen, the hounds settled a bit, some of them slowing down to sniff at the ground, a few of them wrestling with each other. I studied the ones closest to me who stood still enough that I could get a better look.

Indeed, three heads crowned each of the beasts, and they seemed to operate independently of each other too. Short, shaggy black fur covered their bodies, their long tails swishing back and forth. Just one tail for each hound, I noticed with a bit of relief. I wasn’t sure I could take more multiplied weirdness.

The ears on their heads were mostly pointed upward like wolves’, although a few of them flapped...like puppy ears are wont to do. They had long snouts, and the hounds whose lips were pulled back displayed a set of intimidating teeth. Those fangs could easily measure the length of my forearm.

“So?” Azazel’s question jerked me out of my observation. “Which one do you like?”

“Um.” I grimaced and let my gaze rove over the beasts bounding around the pen. “I still need a minute.”

Out of all the hounds, one repeatedly caught my eye. Maybe it was the way it tried to eat dirt. Or how it tripped over its paws. Or seemed startled by its own tail. All of its six ears flopped wildly around its heads, giving it an endearingly disheveled-looking appearance, what with quite a few of those ears seeming to be permanently stuck turned inside out and showing the pink inner part.

“That one.” I pointed at the beast.

Azazel stilled, then stiffly faced me with his arms folded in front of his chest. “You jest.”

“It looks adorable, as far as four-hundred-pound predators go.”

“The deciding factor shouldn’t be cuteness,” he replied. “As your guard, it needs to be sharp. This one looks like its favorite pastime is running into walls.”

“Hael.” I turned to the other demon, who’d joined us again, standing unobtrusively a few feet away. I waved at the hound in question. “Is this one protective?”

Hael came to attention, hands clasped behind his back. “Yes. She has no trouble tearing apart whatever threat faces her, and she responds swiftly in training to protect her handler.” The demon paused, then added hesitantly, “She’s just...a bit special in other situations.”

Azazel raised a brow. “You mean dumb.”

Hael grimaced. “More like clumsy, my lord.”

Oh, I could relate to that. “Yes. Her.” I pointed at Ms. Clumsy.

Azazel glared at Hael. “Will she make an adequate guard? I need her to be focused and obedient—to her.” He nodded at me.

“She’s attentive to commands.” Hael inclined his head. “We should try a meeting to see if she’s a good fit for...your....”

A beat of awkward silence as Hael’s uncertainty about my status hung in the air.

“Pet,” I said into the tension, and smiled.

I wasn’t looking at Azazel, yet I felt the singeing heat of his focus on me, its weight heavy and pressing.

“Pet,” my demon husband repeated, his voice a rough rumble. His attention shifted to Hael again. “Set up the meeting.”

“Right away, my lord.” Hael left with a bow.

“What?” I asked after a moment.

Azazel had been staring at me with an inscrutable expression, the silence between us weighted. Now he simply shook his head in non-answer to my question, as Hael called the hounds back inside from the door on the opposite side of the enclosure.

All except Ms. Clumsy.

She tried to jog after the others, tripped over her own legs and face-planted in the dirt. With all three of her faces.

Beside me, Azazel pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

Hael whistled low, and the hellhound scrambled to a stand, then sat at attention. The demon gave a sign to Azazel.

“Come,” my skeptical spouse said and opened a gate on our side, waving me through.

Gingerly, I entered the pen, my heart thundering.

“I’m right behind you.” Azazel laid a hand on my lower back.

“Oh, good.” I swallowed. “So she’ll have to chew through me to get to you.”

His power stroked along my spine, his low laugh filling my mind.

“What’s her name?” he asked Hael.

“Vengeance.”

I snorted.

Hael shot me a dark look.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “It’s a good name. A strong name. Fierce. Well-chosen.” I gave the demon a thumbs-up. “A beastly name, a—”

Azazel's hand covered my mouth. "Who are her parents?"

"Rage and Devastation."

"Hm." Azazel's voice was thoughtful. "That's a good bloodline."

Hael preened.

"Let's see it, then." Azazel removed his hand from my mouth, moved it to my shoulder and squeezed. "Call her."

I cleared my throat. "I feel like I need to point out that I'm not the most authoritative person. I don't do well giving commands, I mean."

"Really?" Azazel's voice dripped with amusement. "Could have fooled me."

I narrowed my eyes, which was totally lost on Azazel, of course, since I faced away from him.

Hael, on the other hand, looked distinctly confused.

"All right, then," I muttered, squared my shoulders, stood up straight, and firmed my voice. "Vengeance. Come here."

All six floppy ears flopped adorably around as the hound swiveled her heads toward me. I slapped my thigh.

Tongues lolling out, Vengeance loped over to me. I had a second of terror-frozen doubt at the sight of the lion-sized, three-headed canine from Hell bounding in my direction, and I probably would have backed up if Azazel's hand on my lower back had given me an inch to do so.

A moment later, I had three large snouts sniffing all over my body, and when I say all over, I really mean *all over*—one of her heads was between my legs, taking a good sniff of my privates.

I squeaked and pushed the offending snout away, only to have another one check out my left armpit. Wet breath on my ear, a tongue on my right hand. I flailed.

"Sit!" I yelped.

All three heads retreated as Vengeance sat down—or intended to. She kind of toppled over. Only for a second, then she bounced back up and parked her butt on the floor, her tail thumping, her six eyes fixed on me.

"Good girl," I said.

The tail thumped harder. One of the ears that had been normal now flopped in the other direction, showing the pink inside.

Grinning, I stepped up to her. "Who's a good girl?"

Thump, thump, thump.

"Who's a good girrrrrrrl?" I reached out and scratched her middle head.

Her butt wiggled, and her other two heads tried to bump the middle one away to get to my hand, which resulted in her toppling over again. I went to rub her belly, and she rolled right over to give me better access, all four legs in the air, twitching.

"*You* are," I crooned, scratching the soft fur on her belly. "Yes, you are. Good girl, such a good girl. Look at you. Oh! You're so sweet. You like them belly wubs? Yes, you do!"

Azazel cleared his throat.

I glanced up at him. He looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon.

Hael coughed in his hand. "She, uh, she has a perfect kill record, my lord. Her shred time is under a minute."

One of her heads tried to bite her tail while the other two did their best to lick me.

"I want her," I said to Azazel.

He seemed to be in pain. "Are you sure?"

"She's the one."

“She just fell over again while trying to get up.”

“She’s spatially challenged, so what?”

He tilted his head back and glanced at the ceiling, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like, “Hell give me patience.”



I GRINNED ALL THE WAY OUT OF THE KENNEL BUILDING. Hael would deliver Vengeance to me shortly, after a few last preparations. Azazel’s sour expression notwithstanding, he hadn’t protested my choice further, his only comment being, “Of *course* you would pick the dorkiest runt of the litter.”

Despite his mood, the flight back to his balcony featured another toe-curling, *you need a distraction* kiss—not that I was complaining.

Once in his suite, he led me to the lobby room thingy with the fountain in the middle...and Hekesha patiently waiting, her hands clasped behind her back.

“My lord.” She bowed her head.

Azazel nodded at her. “Wait outside.”

She immediately left, closing the door behind her.

“Hekesha will escort you to your rooms,” Azazel said to me. “I have business to take care of, but I’ll come to see you later.”

I squinted at him. “As in...a date?”

He seemed to consider that. “I am,” he finally said, stepping so close that his power pressed against my skin, a thousand tiny stamps of his energy marking me, claiming me cell by cell, “making an effort to engage with you.” He leaned down, his mouth only an inch from my ear, his breath tingling on my neck. “Wasn’t that what you wanted?”

I didn’t dare move for fear of my body turning liquid. “I did.”

He shifted so our gazes met, his eyes flaring with lightning, boring into me. I felt those damned, unruly layers of myself unfolding under his intense regard.

“I still do,” I added in a whisper.

A smile that promised bliss. “Good.”

He turned and strode back through the door to his sitting room, presumably to take off from that balcony of his. To Hell knew where.

Given the size of his mansion and his rank—clearly not too low on the hierarchy, as evidenced by the fact he had so many subordinates—he probably held a lot of responsibilities. Not that I knew much about duties of lords in feudal systems, which Hell seemed to be, but I imagined the workload to be similar to that of CEOs of large corporations. Which meant it was likely he had a full schedule of shit to deal with every day.

I stared after him for a minute, then turned to relieve poor Hekesha from waiting on me out in the hallway.

Before, when I’d first seen her in that entrance hall with Zaquiel, I hadn’t gotten a good look at her. The Fallen took up most of my attention, and then...Azazel appeared, commanding my focus in more ways than one.

I studied her now as she bowed her head and signaled for me to follow her. Her long black hair fell down her back in a tight braid, swinging right next to a huge sword she carried in a harness whose straps criss-crossed over her chest. More knives and daggers were fastened to her arms and

thighs, and even something that looked like a mini crossbow.

Her clothing fit the warrior vibe—leather pants and reinforced tunic, arm guards and extra protection on her shins as well. Even Azazel in what I had come to think of as his fighting gear hadn't been this obviously decked out in weapons. To be honest, I hadn't seen him carry a sword or anything so far.

Neither had Zaquiell been armed. Or Azmodea or Mammon.

Maybe it had something to do with rank? That...or level of power. I pursed my lips. Of course. The stronger a demon's magic or whatever it was they wielded—they obviously had some form of supernatural force at their disposal—the less they must have need of actual weapons.

Over the course of our trek down into the lower levels of Azazel's house—I noticed how many stairs we descended—I tried in vain to strike up a conversation with Hekesha. Every one of my questions got a short reply that didn't reveal much about her, and I gave up after what felt like twenty minutes. It took us more than double that time to reach my rooms.

A spark of irritation lit inside me. Now that I'd gotten a better impression of the layout of Azazel's mansion, one thing was abundantly clear. My suite was at what amounted to the very bottom of this structure, likely just one floor above the dungeon, if he indeed had one. Which I didn't doubt anymore after seeing those wings pinned to the wall.

My rooms, I guessed, were about as far away from Azazel's as was possible while still under the same roof.

His recent change in behavior notwithstanding, he really had meant to park me out of sight and out of mind here, in the bowels of his mansion. Like a secret hidden away in the basement.

Yeah, I was still sore about that.

So sore, in fact, that it soured any incipient joy about his announcement to come see me later.

Crumbs, a voice whispered in my head, suspiciously sounding like my mom. *You're cheering for crumbs he's throwing you, as if you don't deserve more.*

Hekesha bowed her head as she waved me into my rooms. "Please call if you require anything."

She turned on her heel, walking off with her braid swinging behind her, leaving me with my own grumbling thoughts.

CHAPTER 12

I HADN'T REALIZED HOW HUNGRY I WAS UNTIL THE GREMLINS BROUGHT ME LUNCH—OR WAS THAT dinner? I'd lost track of time—and after freshening up a little to get the hellhound slobber off my face, I spent the next hours doing yoga and generally just chilling on whatever available soft surface in my rooms.

This day had been a lot. I'd gone crazy with boredom before, but after the events of the past twenty-something hours, I was grateful for the quiet and relaxation of my suite.

I'd just cracked open a book, vegging out on one of the couches, when a knock sounded from the door. Frowning, I snapped the book shut and eyed the door.

That was new. No one had ever really bothered to knock before, they just threw the door open and strode in, be it Azazel, the gremlins, or Azmodea.

The knock came again, and I realized I'd probably have to separate my bum from the couch to let in whoever had manners enough to wait for my acknowledgment of their presence.

With a sigh, I heaved myself up and trotted over to the door, pulled it open and blinked at the foreign demon on the other side.

"I'm here to take you to your rooms," the unknown male said, his brown hair shifting as he bowed his head.

It took me a moment to fully grasp his words. "But...these *are* my rooms."

"Not anymore," the demon replied.

The sound of tiny feet padding on the stone floor, and then a veritable horde of gremlins flowed past him, past me—I had to jump to the side to not be overrun—and into the room. They swarmed around and proceeded to grab whatever they could get their hands on, throwing it into the bags and boxes they carried.

"Hey!" I cried. "That's my stuff."

"Lord Azazel has given the order to relocate you," the demon said, drawing my attention to him again. "Your belongings will be packed up and moved as well. If you'll follow me." He stepped back and gestured into the hallway.

I hesitated, my mind jumping to the one item I sure wouldn't want anyone else to touch and move. I was halfway to the bedroom when I remembered...I'd left it lying on the counter in Azazel's bathroom.

Good Lord, I had to get it back. Somehow. Without *asking* him for it.

If only I could summon, dammit!

Face burning, I turned back to the demon, cleared my throat and said, "All right. Lead the way."

My simmering suspicion of maybe being relocated to the fabled dungeons after all—Azazel's

recent behavior suggested otherwise, but who knew with that capricious demon—evaporated with every staircase we ascended on our way to my new lodging. With this much climbing, I sure didn't need exercise anymore today. Although I might have to keep up some form of it, judging by the way I gasped for breath soon.

My demon guide threw me a glance. "Do you need a break?"

He was utterly ungasping, the fiend. His breath hadn't even sped up a little.

"I'm fine," I wheezed. The rattle in my lungs painted me a liar.

He raised a brow and stopped, leaning against the hallway wall at the top of the stairs we'd just cleared.

"No, no," I panted, clinging to the handrail. "We can...keep going."

"If you collapse," he said and crossed his arms, "Lord Azazel will skewer me."

"Like, literally?"

Expression sinister, the demon nodded. "I have strict orders not to touch you, so if you fall and I need to carry you, I'll end up on a stick."

I blinked, and an image of those damn, pinned wings flashed across my inner eye. "Okay," I said weakly and slid down until my butt hit the top step of the stairs. Gesturing at myself, I said, "This is not collapsing, just for the record. I'm admiring the masonry." I stroked the stone and nodded appreciatively. "Such great craftsmanship. Very fine work."

Something like the hint of a smile flitted across the demon's face. Like Hekesha, he was armed to the teeth, his clothes fit for battle.

"So, while we're waiting for me to finish my assessment of the workmanship of these stairs," I said, still catching my breath, "maybe you can help me answer some questions."

His expression became guarded. "Within reason."

"Okay, so, first off, what's your name?"

"Caleb."

"Nice to meet you, Caleb. I'm Zoe." I waved. "Now, what's with all these weapons? I noticed Hekesha was packing as well, but Azazel and Azmodea weren't. Neither was Zaquiel. Is it because you're a guard?"

He stiffened. "*Lord* Azazel and his peers are full-blood demons."

Oh, crap. I'd blundered the titles, hadn't I? It was probably an unimaginable affront to use Azazel's name without his honorific, even when he wasn't present...or at least it would be inappropriate for someone lower in status than him, which I would be as his *pet*.

Rubbing my nose, I amended, "My lord and master, of course. Wait—so you're..."

"Half-blood." A glimmer of defiance in his brown eyes.

And Hekesha likely was one as well. Interesting.

"Were you born on Earth?"

A slow nod.

"Did you grow up there?"

"Until my powers came in."

"And then you came to live down here?"

His mouth twisted with a sardonic smile. "Came. Dragged." He shrugged. "Semantics."

"Oh." I fidgeted with the seam of my tank top. "How...how does it work, with half-bloods? Don't you have a choice?"

"Generally, no. Especially not when you accidentally set your home on fire, with your human mother in it."

I covered my mouth with one hand. "I'm so sorry."

"We should go." He pushed off the wall and sauntered down the hallway.

Hurrying after him, I bit my lip. I probably shouldn't pry further, given the delicacy of the topic, but I had to know. "Is Az—Lord Azazel your father?"

He threw a glance at me over his shoulder. "No."

Silence hung between us for a few steps.

Caleb's quiet words startled me. "I'd have fared better if he were."

I swallowed. "I take it you and your father didn't get along." Something twisted in my chest. "I can relate to that."

"Half-bloods," he said after a moment, "aren't valued as highly as full-blood offspring. We're weaker than demons, so we're used for menial labor instead of more important tasks. Some see a certain worth in us, since we're not bound to Hell the same way demons are, and can stay on Earth indefinitely to work there on our sire's behalf." A pause heavy with old pain. "And some see us as little more than slaves to be whipped around."

I cringed. Okay, as far as daddy issues went, mine were a blip on the radar compared to his. "How did you end up in Lord Azazel's service?"

"My father is of lower rank and indebted to Lord Azazel himself. So Lord Azazel conscripted me, as is his right as lord of this demesne." His eyes met mine for a second. "And I thank Lucifer every day for that conscription."

Even with the threat of being skewered if he disobeyed a direct order. Oof, his father really had to be a monster.

"A—Lord Azazel mentioned half-bloods have some powers," I ventured. "Do you?"

In answer, he lifted his hand, and a flame erupted from his palm. He let it dance over his arm then back to his hand, where he extinguished it with a snap of his fingers.

"That is so cool," I whispered.

The ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Can you summon?"

He grimaced. "It goes wrong more often than it works."

"Oh?"

"I end up getting a different object, or it appears not in my hand but...other places."

I pressed my mouth into a tight line to keep from laughing. "That sounds...aggravating."

"Very much so." Amusement whispered behind his stony expression.

He stopped in front of a door, threw it open and waved me inside.

Alrighty, so these were to be my new quarters? Unsure what to expect, I entered—and stopped short at the understated luxury that greeted me. As spacious as any one of Azazel's in his personal suite, the room spreading out in front of me featured plush purple carpet on the stone floor, finished walls painted a soothing shade of lilac, and an assortment of white couches and comfy chairs.

More than that, though, there was a window in the far wall. An honest-to-God—or would that be honest-to-Lucifer?—window. Gaping, I headed right for it, halting in front of the floor-to-ceiling pane of glass showing the spectacle of dusky sky churning with flashes of violet lightning outside. Of course, the obligatory bars covered the window, same as in Azazel's bedroom and the huge panoramic window wall I'd seen in the hall before the *infern*i got on my tail.

"If you need anything," Caleb said, pulling me out of my contemplation, "use this plaque here, or the mirror over there."

I turned, my brows drawing together. "Mirror?"

He pointed at the wall to my left, and indeed, an ornate, black-framed mirror hung there.

“How does it work?” At his surprised expression, I added in a drawl, “My magic mirror skills are a bit rusty, sorry.”

“You draw a sigil on it, and it calls the recipient you intend to reach. If they’re close to a sibling of this mirror, they may accept the call and you’re connected.”

A sigil. I uttered a dry laugh. So anytime I wanted to make a call, I’d have to bleed. Splendid.

“Thanks,” I said to Caleb. “Just to refresh my memory, could you draw me the correct sigil?”

“Sure.” His gaze roamed the room, likely in search of something to write on. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and held out his hand.

“What are you—”

A banana appeared in his palm.

He swore and put the fruit on the nearest table.

“It’s...longish,” I said with a nod, trying hard to choke back my laughter.

Narrowing his eyes, he held up a finger. “One more try.”

“Okay.”

He closed his eyes again, his forehead wrinkling...and winced when something small hit him in the face. With another curse, he caught the pen before it fell to the ground.

“I am not even going to attempt to summon a piece of paper,” he said, his voice a warning growl.

“A wise decision,” I agreed sagely. “Just scrawl it on the wall next to the mirror.”

That done, he handed me the pen and inclined his head. “I’ll be off, then. It was nice meeting you, Zoe.”

“See you around.” I waved as he headed out the door, then turned to inspect the rest of the suite.

A hallway to the right of the main door to the suite led to more rooms, each one as large as my entire apartment in San Francisco. There was a library—a veritable library, with floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with books, and comfy reading furniture—and next to it another exercise room with more equipment, like a private mini gym.

I entered the room one door down and gaped at a bathroom that could rival Azazel’s in size and luxury, only the color scheme here seemed the opposite of his. Silver marble with black veins. And—this one featured a tub in addition to a shower. Sunk into the floor, it had steps leading down into its basin, already filled with steaming water.

Well, *hello* there.

I’d be sure to check this one out later, in thorough detail.

My gaze fell on the toilet—another Japanese model, minus the name I’d scrawled on the other one in my previous rooms. I smirked.

One more door led from the hallway, and it opened into a spacious bedroom with another panoramic—albeit barred—window in one wall. The lightning flashing through the pane illuminated the generous bed, decked out in pillows and silken sheets in shades of blue, scattered with silver embroidery.

The rest of the room held your typical sleeping quarters furniture—armoire, dresser, nightstands, as well as a full-length mirror.

There was another door beside the bed, unobtrusively set into the wall. Probably a closet. I opened it to make sure—and my jaw fell to the floor.

Azazel’s bedroom stretched out before me. I stalked into the room—which lay empty in semi-darkness, its owner still out on business, apparently—and checked the wall where the door connected this to my own room. I was certain that wall had been bare before, no sign of a door or anything

leading to another room.

Now it looked like the connection had always been there.

Well, damn.

I'd been miffed that he'd parked me in those faraway quarters at the literal bottom of his house, his initial intention to ignore me clear in the location, and now this. He'd practically moved me into his suite.

Sure, there was a door separating us, and I was certain he'd never use that door unless I invited him to. Given everything I'd learned about him so far, he wouldn't steamroll over my consent and take liberties without my permission. This was still my private space, and I could shut him out if I wanted to.

But that door was there. Right *there*. A tempting reminder of his now openly declared interest.

I narrowed my eyes and sucked my teeth. Yeah, this was likely more for me than for him. He was good at that, wasn't he? Not manipulation, per se, but arranging pieces in a way that would lead to certain conclusions. A cleverly set-up playing field.

Every time I'd see that door, I'd think of him, knowing what lay just beyond it. And my bed stood against the very wall separating our rooms, with his bed in the same spot on the other side. I'd go to sleep with the knowledge that he'd lie stretched out on those silken black sheets only a few feet from me, and that stone wall between us would melt in my unruly mind.

Did he sleep naked?

Goddammit, it already started!

My fingers itched to glide over his mattress, my nose all too eager to be pressed once more into his pillow, soak up his scent. I'd seen him without clothes, and now my brain helpfully conjured up that exact image and planted it on the huge bed, between those rumpled sheets, all that glorious bronze skin over taut muscles, a sensual, inviting smile on his lips as he grasped his cock—

I whirled around and stalked back to that blasted connecting door, fuming. At him, at myself. At the low-pulsing desire persistently eroding all good sense.

Almost through the door, I paused, pursed my lips. My gaze flicked to the door to his bathroom.

He wasn't the only one who could play.

I snatched my vibrator from where it still lay on the vanity countertop and marched back to his bed. My clothes hit the floor, and then I hit the sheets, making sure to rub my now naked self generously over his mattress. With a sigh, I set the vibrator between my thighs, my intimate flesh already wet and swollen.

Demons had a superior sense of smell, didn't they?

I grinned and got down to business.

It didn't usually take long for me to get off with my vibe. Depending on my state of arousal, sometimes as little as two minutes. I'd be back in my own suite in no time.

Lying there, in Azazel's bed, utterly naked with my legs spread wide, did give me an extra thrill, heightened the excitement pulsing through me. The suite lay silent, just my quickened breathing and the hum of the vibrator.

The possibility of discovery amped up my adrenaline, even though it was unlikely I'd be taken unawares completely—the vibe was extra quiet and wouldn't drown out the sound of someone making an entrance. The door to the next room was ajar, and I'd hear it if anyone came in, would see the lights flaring in the rest of the suite.

I could be out of this bed and behind the connecting door in seconds.

I'd be *fine*, and Azazel would have a nice olfactory surprise waiting for him.

Biting my lip, I closed my eyes for a moment and pressed the vibe down on my clit. Pleasure zinged through me. My toes curled, grasped the sheets, and my hips lifted off the mattress.

The image of Azazel in all his naked glory flashed through my mind. His hand squeezing his cock. That gleam of hunger in his eyes as he looked at me. In my imagination, he stroked the length of his dick, slowly, tantalizingly, while he prowled closer, closer...

I thought of those sensual lips of his on my skin, on my breasts, licking and sucking like he'd done during the meeting, only now no lace—however flimsy—separated the heat of his mouth from my nipples.

A quick glance to the door in the wall in front of me, leading to the next room, and the window to the balcony confirmed I was still alone.

I laid my free hand on my breast, squeezed and teased the tight, sensitive bud.

Desire curled in my core, the pressure mounting. I was close, so close.

"I would ask if you're thinking of me..."

I froze at the familiar voice, the purred question coming from my left, followed by the snick of a door falling shut.

"...but you're projecting quite beautifully already."

Heart thundering, I turned my head.

Wreathed in shadows, Azazel leaned with one shoulder against the now closed door to my suite—the door I *hadn't* monitored, so sure he'd come back either from the balcony to my right, or the door to the rest of his suite in the wall opposite the bed.

The vibrator buzzed between my thighs. My hand was still on my breast, fingers pinching my nipple.

His eyes flashed lightning in the semi-darkness.

"Fuck," I breathed.

"That can be arranged." His voice was lust wrapped in sin, his power drenching the room.

My inner muscles clenched, the ache growing only stronger for the lack of something to clench *around*. I couldn't wrench my gaze away from Azazel's, couldn't move, my hand clutching that damn vibe. Its incessant, persistent buzzing reinforced the throbbing around my clit.

If I shifted it just a little, pressed down right there...I'd come apart. The wave hovered, crested, a heartbeat away from breaking.

The vibrator disappeared.

One moment I held its weight, the hum of its motor massaging my flesh, the next my hand was empty. My fingers twitched around nothing.

Because I was still holding Azazel's gaze, I saw in clear, excruciating detail how he lifted his hand—now grasping my vibe—up to his face and inhaled. The shadows surrounding him deepened while his eyes flared with silver fire.

I made a sound close to a whimper.

That spot between my thighs, primed and ready, wet and waiting, almost hurt because of the abrupt abandonment, the lack of pressure.

"Need a hand?" The timbre of his voice stroked me as much as a physical caress.

I trembled. Yearned.

"I've got two," I whispered, clueless where that sass came from at this moment. "But thanks."

And as if all my good sense had made a nosedive into reckless territory, I lowered my fingers until they pressed against my clit.

He was on me before I could draw my next breath.

Grasping my wrists, he shoved my arms above my head, his large frame looming over me as he straddled me. The mattress dipped with his weight. His power pulsed in the air, making my heart stutter.

And yet he didn't touch me anywhere other than to hold my wrists in place.

The stark juxtaposition of him still fully clothed while I quivered naked underneath him did something delicious to my insides.

"When you're in my bed," he murmured, the dominant glint in his eyes pinning me as effectively as his hold on my wrists, "you will not come by your own touch."

I swallowed, my mouth gone dry. I had to push him, didn't I?

"If you want release," he continued, his thumbs now rubbing over my pulse points, "you either leave this bed and get off in your own, alone..."

I squirmed, my skin too tight, too hot.

"...or you stay..." His gaze burned me. "...and ask me to take care of you."

My breaths sawed in and out of me.

"What's it going to be, Zoe?"

God help me.

That knife's edge on which I balanced. It would cut me deep.

"Leave, or stay?"

My choice, my choice, my...

I inhaled on a tremble, licked my lips, and rasped, "Stay."

A beat of silence, the tension between us prickling to the point of pain. Then he smiled, a genuine, brilliantly seductive smile that warmed his eyes and made my stomach flip.

"Good." How this one word, said in a timbre that hummed over every sensitive, touch-hungry part of my body, could encompass so much pleasure was beyond me. And yet it plucked a chord inside me, made me melt a little more in his grasp.

I stared at him, expectantly, anticipating, every nerve ending tuned in to his presence. My clit still craved pressure, craved touch, wanted what he could give me. What he'd promised.

He remained unmoving, just held my gaze as surely as he held my wrists pinned over my head. Waiting, I realized.

I huffed out a breath. "You're really gonna make me say it, aren't you?"

A sly smile was his answer, followed by the slightest brush of his energy over my breasts. I shivered, shifted, trying to chase that touch. In vain, of course, as it was as tangible as breath.

"Unfair," I muttered. My chest heaved as I inhaled and gave him what he was waiting for. "Make me come."

He raised a brow.

"Please," I added with a smile that bordered on a fierce declaration of war.

Amusement danced in his eyes. "You make an art form out of spiteful surrender."

"You seem to enjoy it."

His lips twitched upward. "Fingers," he asked, "mouth, or cock?"

My toes curled, and I pressed my thighs together against the flare of lust shooting straight down to my core. "All of it," I whispered. "In that order."

His soft laugh was at odds with the feral look on his face. "Greedy, much?"

"Don't tell me you're not up for it." I should really stop poking at him. I would.

Soon. Ish.

"Hm." One corner of his mouth lifted, his eyes flashing.

Wait, I knew that look. He was up to someth—

He'd flipped me over before I could so much as squeak. My over-sensitive nipples met the mattress, my throbbing mound brushed the sheets, and I bit back a moan as I turned my head, my hair half-obscuring my sight.

Still holding my wrists with one hand, he pressed me into the bed with the full length of his body at my back, stretching out on top of me. The fact I could still breathe spoke to him balancing part of his weight somewhere else. If he truly, fully lay on top of me, I'd be a breathless pancake on the bed, I was sure.

"Does this feel," he murmured into my ear, "like I'm not up to it?"

And to make his point indisputably clear, he pushed his hips down, shoving the part of him that was most obviously *up for it* against my ass.

My breath hitched, and fresh desire pooled between my legs. Made me push back against the hardness of his cock, even though he was still in those damn pants.

"Why," I panted, "are you still dressed?"

A heavy pause, as if he was contemplating the very same question.

"Patience," he said at last, and the word rang with enough sensual menace that I whimpered.

"That's a virtue," I pointed out, as he stroked one hand down my side, skimming the curve of my breast and leaving goosebumps in its wake. "You're a demon."

"Astutely observed."

"You have no business being virtuous," I snapped.

He bit my neck. Pleasure shot like lightning down my spine. My back arched, my hips angling back. I pushed against him, desperate for more pressure, more touch...for him to finally penetrate me, whether by finger, tongue, or cock. I didn't care. I just needed to feel him inside me. Some part of him.

"Please," I groaned, way past caring that my begging had turned real.

He hummed against my neck in response, a sound so smugly satisfied, so full of masculine arrogance that it would have raised my hackles...had he not licked and suckled on the exact spot where he bit me, sending more torturous pleasure coursing through my veins.

His hand stroking down my side slid under me, wedged between the mattress and my abdomen...lower.

I trembled, my stomach muscles tightening.

His fingers grazed the top of my mound, ran through the trimmed hair...skimmed around my swollen clit.

A sound that was half gasp, half moan escaped me.

He hissed as he touched my labia, slick with my arousal. "So wet."

My answer was another moan as I arched into his hand. *Yes. Yes, please. More.*

He pushed two fingers inside me, pumped deep while he pressed the heel of his hand against my clit. My breath caught, my pulse stumbling. The heat within me built, built, built.

He added a third finger, pushed hard against a spot inside. I stiffened, teetering on the edge.

His teeth on my neck again, sharp points of pain that zapped through me, mingled with the mounting pleasure—and I shattered.

A cry wrenched itself from my throat. I bucked and writhed, a firestorm of bliss coursing through me.

Before I even came down from the height of my climax, he'd pulled up my hips so I was on my knees—my upper body and face still sprawled on the mattress, but my ass in the air—and then his

mouth was on me.

I gasp-squeaked and jolted at the heat of his tongue on my intimate, swollen flesh. A rumble sounded from him, the kind of fierce, hungry growl you'd hear before a lion feasted.

And feast he did.

He licked and sucked, his tongue flicking and teasing, stroking my folds and spearing into me. A sensual ambush of lips and tongue and teeth with the ferocity of a starved, wild creature.

Good God, I'd never been eaten out like this.

Going with the dining metaphor, all of my other oral encounters now seemed like listless poking at food compared to this...this...ravenous devouring. Azazel went all in, no holds barred, with a devotion to raw, unbridled, passionate oral worship that made every muscle in my body quiver and quake.

"Oh, God," I moaned, my fingers grasping the sheet. "Ohgodohgodohg—"

Dark power rippled over me, charged the air with a lick of menace just as his teeth gripped my folds.

Who? The snarled question filled my head, reverberated inside my skull.

"Azazel," I wheezed.

He sucked my flesh, pushed three fingers inside me. His thumb circled my clit.

Louder.

"Az—Azazel!" I groaned as another orgasm ripped me to shreds, even more intense than the first.

By the time I floated back into the room again, his name was a whispered prayer on my lips, a mantra echoing inside my head, a pulse underneath my skin.

White-hot lightning in his eyes as he rose over me, his gaze searing every raw, laid-bare layer of myself. *He flipped me again*, I thought sluggishly, my limbs tingling with the aftermath of orgasmic destruction, sweat coating my skin.

His muscles flexed in his arms and shoulders as he braced himself over me. I'd been so blissed out, I hadn't even noticed how he'd stripped.

Now I couldn't tear my gaze away from the expanse of rough-hewn masculine beauty hovering so close, so close... I reached out, stroked over his pecs—covered in trimmed dark hair—up to the bulging muscles in his shoulders, to his strong neck.

His energy was a velveteen kiss to my senses, caressing my mind as I caressed him.

I let my hand glide toward his jaw, over his chin, to that sensual, damnably skilled mouth of his. My thumb stroked over his lower lip, once, twice.

He grabbed my wrist, nipped at my fingers, and pressed my arm next to my head as he leaned down and kissed me. A perfect storm of power and coaxing seduction, possession and lure, he had me arching my back and pressing against him. I tasted myself on his lips, his tongue, and I shivered at the erotic effect of smelling my own arousal on his skin.

He nudged my legs wide with his knee, and I didn't need the prompt of his free hand on my thigh to wrap my legs around his hips.

The hard length of his cock pressed against my slick mound, rubbed right over my clit, and I moaned into his mouth. Barely banked, the fire in my core reignited, sizzling through my veins in single-minded anticipation.

Yes? A purr in my mind.

Yessssss, I hissed back. Then—*Wait. Should we use condoms or something?*

We don't carry disease. A pause. *And I believe you still have that nifty device inside you that makes you temporarily infertile?*

I blinked, gaped at him. *How do you...?*

Kept tabs on you. He winked.

Winked.

Son of a—

I felt his throaty chuckle in his kiss, and then my mind blanked, all thoughts wiped out as he finally, finally pushed inside me.

My eyes rounded, breath hitching at the intense pleasure-pain of his cock stretching me. Too much, too much, even with all that wetness as lubrication. My thighs tightened around his hips.

He paused, watching my expression intently. “Need a moment?”

I nodded, hauling in a breath. “Maybe that patience of yours,” I muttered, “is not so bad after all.”

One side of his mouth turned up. He leaned forward, trailing slow, tantalizing kisses down my jaw, my throat, all the way to the swell of my breasts. Licking a line of fire to my nipple, he circled the peaked bud, teased it with his teeth, then closed his mouth over it and sucked. I arched into his touch, and my inner muscles clenched around his cock before they relaxed...and the stretch of his girth lessened.

He rocked his hips forward, just a little, but enough to seat himself further inch by inch as I adjusted to his size. His mouth continued wreaking sensual havoc on my breasts while each movement of his dick inside me fired off sparks of renewed desire until I panted, angling my hips to meet his shallow thrusts.

Taking my cue, he made those thrusts deeper, more powerful. I gasped, clutched his shoulder as he nipped at my neck, his hand now on my breast, thumb flicking my nipple. Every stroke of his hips rubbed against my clit, drove my arousal higher, higher, higher. My legs trembled with the need to draw him deeper.

In a move too fast for me to even process, he pulled out and flipped me yet again, positioning me on my hands and knees. Spreading my legs wide, he gripped my hips with one hand, the other on my back, and pushed into me again.

I moaned, surrendering to the prickling sensation rushing outward from the renewed erotic invasion, the deeper angle. Hard, he rode me so hard my entire body shook, and I loved every damn second of it. Arching my spine, I threw back my head, my breath matching his quickening thrusts.

Lust and pressure and the promise of bliss coiled inside me. I just needed...needed...

Sharp stinging on my scalp as he gripped my hair, pulled me up until my back met his chest. His other hand slid around to my belly, dipped between my legs, his fingers clamping down on my clit while he continued to pump into me.

I detonated.

There’s no other word for it. I splintered at the seams from an explosion of pleasure.

Faster, harder, his thrusts grew wild and uncontrolled, his own need finally unleashed. My front met the mattress again as he pushed me down while he gripped my hips and rode me until I saw stars.

I barely noticed the moment he found his own pleasure, my mind too foggy with post-orgasmic ecstasy. I just all but collapsed as he savored his climax with slowing thrusts until it was only his hands holding my hips up. My muscles had effectively turned to cooked spaghetti, my bones liquefied.

A long, slow stroke of his hand over my spine, the caress of dark power on my senses. I wheezed with my face half planted into the mattress. My hair was tangled all around my head, and my arms and hands—I wasn’t quite sure what they were doing, where they even were. Did I still have arms? I couldn’t feel them.

Maybe they’d melted.

I considered that option. I couldn't feel my legs either, for that matter.

Only Azazel's hands on my hips, and the devastating aftermath of orgasmic destruction in my nether regions.

His fingers tightened their grip as he pulled out, and I groaned at the delicious sting of movement against my battered inner muscles, my sensitized flesh...and at the sudden emptiness, the cooling lick of air on my skin.

With more care than I'd anticipated, he guided my hips down, made sure my liquified—melted?—limbs flowed into a comfortable position. The mattress shifted as he likely moved off the bed. I couldn't see. My face was still mostly plastered to the sheet, and my hair hid what little vision I'd have had.

Floating. I was floating.

The mattress dipped again. A touch between my legs, something warm and wet and soft, like a washcloth. Still, I hissed at the sensation, too much for my raw skin.

"Shh." His hand on my hip. "I'm just cleaning you."

"Oh," I rasped, my voice hoarse. "No one's ever done that for me."

"That's because no one's ever fucked you limp before."

I uttered a dry laugh. "Touché."

The touch of the washcloth vanished, as did his hand from my hip, and he moved off the bed again.

I floated some more.

Until he gently turned me on my back, pushed the tangled strands of hair off my face, and pressed something in my hand. I turned my head and squinted.

"It's a glass of water," he said with a hint of amusement.

"I know—I was just—so that's where my hand is."

The look he gave me bordered on concerned. He watched me squint some more at my miraculously solidified hand before he sighed, slid an arm under my back and dragged me into his lap. Folding his hand around mine still grasping the glass, he raised it to my lips.

"Drink."

I obeyed. I hadn't realized how parched my mouth was until I gulped the water down. Once done, I let him take the glass and set it on the nightstand.

I was still sitting sideways on his lap, his one arm slung around my back. And he was still gloriously naked. His heat sank into my skin wherever our bodies touched, and...something long and hard pressed against my hip. Very hard.

I slowly raised my gaze to his. "You came, though, didn't you?"

He played with my hair, a sly smile flirting with his mouth. "Yeah."

"That—" I wiggled just enough to underscore my point. "—doesn't feel like it."

"I'm a demon."

I bit back a whimper and scooted off his lap. Or, I would have, had my muscles actually worked. As it was, all I accomplished was to twitch a little.

That sly smile of his turned positively mischievous.

God have mercy. I swallowed, my mouth too dry again. "I can't—"

"Oh, I think you can," he purred, and poured me onto the mattress once more.

CHAPTER 13

BLEARY-EYED, I BLINKED AT THE LOW LIGHT, COMING AWAKE WITH THE SLUGGISHNESS OF A PERSON surfacing from anesthesia. Groaning, I took stock. Hair all over my face, sheets tangled around me, my head half under the pillow, and my body sore in all the right places.

Yep, this had been one hell of a night.

I grinned into the pillow, then inhaled deeply—no scent of the demon responsible for my current state. Huh.

With only a slight wince, I flopped around, peered at where I was. The large bed in my own suite next to Azazel's stretched out underneath me, the blue-and-silver pillows wildly strewn around. He must have carried me over here at some point. Not that I remembered. After the—I squinted and counted—fifth or sixth time, my mind had kind of shut off, too high on endorphins and post-coital bliss.

Crunch.

Startled, I whipped my head around, stared at the source of the sound in the corner of the room...at the impeccably dressed female demon currently sitting in one of the armchairs, munching on an apple.

"Good morning," Azmodea purred and took another bite.

My eyes rounded. I grabbed the blanket and pulled it up to my neck.

Her grin was all sorts of naughty—and knowing. She raised a brow.

Crunch. Munch, munch.

How anyone could turn eating an apple into a full-blown I-know-what-you-did-last-night-you-saucy-wench conversation was beyond me, but my demon sister-in-law somehow managed it.

"What are you doing here?" I got out past the rush of embarrassment, still clutching the blanket right under my chin.

"Why, I came by to thank you, my dear."

"For?"

Crunch. She cast me an arch look as she chewed. "He's been in *such* a shitty mood lately, his temper worse than I've seen it in ages. His entire staff has been walking on eggshells around him for days, and Mammon and I barely wanted to visit. We didn't even dare tease him about this whole marriage trap because he was *this* close to going nuclear already." She indicated a fraction of an inch with her fingers.

"But now." *Crunch.* Her eyes sparkled while she munched.

"What?"

"Now," she continued in a voice that was a sensual caress, "he's strutting around with this smug, satisfied, cat-got-the-cream expression."

My cheeks blazed. He'd definitely gotten the cream. Several times. Licked it up *real* good.

"Apparently he even smiled at some of the staff." Azmodea cocked a brow. "Gave them quite a start with it. And know what he did when he saw me?"

I numbly shook my head.

She leaned forward, half-eaten apple dangling from her hand. "He kissed me on the cheek."

I blinked at her, unsure how to respond.

"That," Azmodea explained at my quizzical look, "is the most affection he's shown me in years."

"Oh." I bit my lip. "That's...kind of sad."

"No." She shook her head. "*He* was sad. Until you—" she pointed at me with the apple "—fucked happy right back into him."

I choked on my own breath.

"There's water over there, sweetie." She waved at the nightstand.

Indeed, a bottle of water and a plate with an assortment of fruit awaited my attention. Coughing, I grabbed the bottle and took a big gulp.

Lord almighty, this family...

"So, thank you," Azmodea said around another bite of her apple. "You've done us all a huge service." She laid her free hand over her heart and blew me a kiss. "Now, I'd ask how it was for you, but I can see your post-orgasmic glow from over here, and judging by the fact you look like you might not be able to move your lower body, I can take an educated guess at his performance."

I closed my eyes and rubbed my face with both hands. Hiding under the covers would be too obvious, right?

"Anyway—" *crunch* "—I just wanted to stop by real quick to express my gratitude. Keep up the good work." She winked at me. "Oh, and Az told me to give you this. He'll be along later."

She stood and sauntered to the bed, pulling my phone out of her pocket. As she handed it over, the screen lit up from the movement.

Lit up.

As in, charged and *on*.

I took the phone with shaking hands, checked the battery. Ninety-eight percent.

My stomach flipped. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Hm." She regarded me with a thoughtful expression. "It's the photos and recordings, isn't it?"

I nodded, my throat tight. It was all I could do not to cradle the fully-charged phone to my chest.

"It's nice to have pictures," she said quietly. "Not just memories that fade away over millennia."

When I looked up at her, her gaze was soft and unfocused, her features dulled by a sadness that pulled at my heart.

"If we'd had this..." She indicated the phone with a nod. "...I might still remember her face."

"Who?" My voice was raw because I anticipated the answer.

"Our mother." The smile she gave me seemed brittle. "She used to sing for us. I remember that it was lovely, but her voice is now lost in a thousand forgotten moments." She blinked, and the sadness fell from her face like a veil. "Ah, look at me, being all maudlin." Clucking her tongue, she pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Call me if you wanna chat or hang out. I've got the *best* masseur on my payroll, so if you need to give those sore muscles of yours some non-sexual loving, let me know. I mean—" a saucy waggle of her brows "—you'll need to be operational again when Az comes back."

She was almost out of the room when she halted, hand on the doorjamb, and looked back at me. "Oh, and he said Hael is waiting for you in the grand room. Something about a hellhound? You're supposed to call for an escort to take you there when you're ready."

Vengeance! I perked right up.

Azmodea sashayed away, and I took a moment to unlock my phone, open the Photos app, and look at the album of my mom. Just a moment, just long enough to relish the fact I could see her face again.

I had no idea how Azazel had figured out that I hadn't dared charge my phone on the dubious outlet in my old suite, or that it would mean this much to me to have my photos accessible again. I honestly didn't care, as long as I could look at the pics. I'd have to check this suite for an outlet later, to see if maybe the setup here was a bit more trustworthy to hook up my phone.

As I navigated out of the albums folder in the Photos app, my gaze got caught on a new pic in the Recents folder. I narrowed my eyes and clicked on it.

An image of Azazel filled the screen, shirtless, lounging on a chair, a seductive smirk playing about his mouth, one eye closed in a playful wink.

I stared. And stared.

Azazel had taken a *selfie*. On my phone.

Never mind that he'd somehow managed to unlock it, I couldn't fathom the fact this demon of two thousand five hundred plus years had held this device, contemplated its features and decided to hand it back to me with photographic eye candy of himself.

But wait, there was more.

I swiped to the previous pic and blinked at the close-up of his forearm. It was a Live Photo, with the effect of having recorded a second of movement before the camera snapped the pic, and that movement...was him flexing the muscles and sinews in his arm.

I bit my lip to keep my grin from splitting my face.

Swiping back again, I discovered...a video. Pulse racing, I clicked Play. Azazel again filled the screen, recording himself with one hand holding the phone—he was still deliciously shirtless—picking up something from outside the camera's field of vision. It looked like he was in his bedroom, close to the seating area near the balcony door.

Lightning from outside the window played over his sculpted chest as he brought the object up, and my thighs clenched in visceral memory. He regarded the vibrator, peered into the room—toward the bed, if I pegged the direction right—and then looked straight at the camera. Raising a brow, he smirked, wiggled the vibe and proceeded to slip it into the pocket of his pants. He patted it for good measure. The video shut off.

I gaped at the screen. Oh, no, he didn't.

Heat flooded my face. Was he really walking around with my vibe in his pocket? My *well-used* vibe, which undoubtedly still had enough of my happy scent on it to be noticeable among sensitive demon noses?

I narrowed my eyes. Talk about a cheeky, possessive alpha male. He might as well be wearing my panties as a necklace. Staking his claim.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that claim. On one hand, wasn't this what I'd wanted? His genuine attention, and him acting like my goddamn husband?

While, yes, a part of me preened at his obvious interest and the way he showed it, I hadn't forgotten that ours was a complicated situation. Neither of us had chosen to be here, with each other. He hadn't chosen *me*. Not really.

And I couldn't help thinking...if he did have the choice—no obligations to care for me, no punishment by contract if he didn't comply—would he walk away?

Would I?

If I had the chance to turn it all back and render this contract null and void, go back to Earth and

my old life, wouldn't I take it?

A heavy feeling settled in my gut, spreading prickling unease through my body until I felt twitchy. Throwing back the blanket, I swung my legs over the side of the bed—ugh, my sore muscles—and stood up, wobbling precariously.

Jesus, I'd never been this "hungover" after sex. Then again, I never *had* this much sex in one night. Even my most eager boyfriend didn't have the stamina necessary for half a dozen rounds, not even counting the times in between when Azazel made me come in other ways.

I had no idea it was physically possible to have that many orgasms in a few hours.

One thing was clear, our sexual chemistry was off-the-charts, and the way we collided bordered on cosmic. I didn't regret taking that step with him, even with the situation being more complex than a casual hookup. It would be fine. *I* would be fine. I could totally do this. I could take advantage of what he offered, have my sexual needs met, and enjoy myself.

I didn't hold any delusions about there being more. I'd never wanted a grand romance anyway.

We were simply making the best of a weird turn of events. There. That was all I needed to contemplate right now.

I was hobbling toward the door when one of the armchairs in the corner caught fire. I didn't even have time to jerk back before a click sounded, and a spray of water showered down from the ceiling, precisely targeted at the isolated piece of furniture in flames. Nothing else in the room got doused in water.

I blinked in shock at the thoroughly calibrated sprinkler and watched the fire hissing its last breaths as it got extinguished.

He—he'd installed a sprinkler system.

Such a waste. A feline voice filled my mind, accompanied by a scratching sound coming from the gloom-shrouded rafters.

I glanced up and spied a long black tail elegantly swishing back and forth.

"Mephistopheles?" I grabbed the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around my body. Not that I thought a hellcat had any interest in human nudity, but still.

Why even bother laying all these pipes? More scratching, the distinct sounds of claws on metal. Takes up so much space here. Not to mention completely unnecessary. You'd think a demon of his intelligence wouldn't waste a resource like this.

"What do you mean?"

Water is scarce. It's true they don't need to drink it to survive, but they need it to groom themselves. And their hounds slobber it up. A delicate sniff. Spilling more than they drink, of course, graceless as they are. A flash of light as his eyes reflected the flames of the torches. Still, there is so little water here that they use it as a status symbol. Have you been to Lucifer's palace?

I gulped. "No." And I had no intention to ever go there.

He has a water garden. Swish, swish went his tail. It's preposterous. As pretentious as the human kings of old. To have so much, and waste it on decoration. All for show and reputation. His wings flared. And now your demon uses it to put out fires... He made a uniquely feline sound of disgust. *It's like I'm not even here.*

I bit my lip. "You are very valuable," I offered. I knew enough about cats to know that if I didn't appease his delicate feline ego, I'd have to deal with his sulking for days on end. And for all that they were quiet and unobtrusive, cats could sulk right in your face. "If not for you, I'd be overrun by vermin! I'm so grateful you're here and making sure this space is free of nasty critters."

Another delicate sniff. *You're lucky you have me.*

“Of course. Your hunting prowess is beyond compare.” I gave him a bright smile.

He licked his paw and purred.

All right, feline tantrum successfully averted, I hurried into the bathroom. I didn’t want to keep Hael waiting any longer than necessary.

Fully bathed and dressed—my belongings had indeed been delivered to this suite while I’d been with Azazel—I stood next to the door and placed my hand on the plaque. When the goblins showed up, I asked to be escorted to the grand room, wherever that was.

Instead of calling for Caleb or Hekesha, the little fiends led me there themselves, grumbling at me the entire time. Fine, I was still mad at them, too, for hog-tying me like a wayward cow.

The grand room turned out to be almost as large as the entrance hall, its vaulted ceiling held by pillars decorated with carvings of fierce beasts and stylized flames. A water fountain bubbled in the center—an ostentatious display of wealth, as I now knew—and Hael sat perched on the low border.

The floor all around him glistened with splashed water, and the slobbery hound responsible for it currently lapped up even more directly from the fountain’s pool.

When I neared, Vengeance lifted all three of her heads, water dripping from her maws, and made as if to bound over to me.

A sharp command from Hael made her sit her butt down.

Okay, she didn’t sit as much as slipped on the spilled water, but hey, the effort counted.

Hael stood and inclined his head.

“Thank you for waiting,” I ventured.

“I have trained her to respond to this,” Hael said and showed me what looked like a small whistle, “in addition to voice commands. You can use it to augment your spoken orders.”

I nodded.

Hael seemed to hesitate. “Have you ever owned a canine?”

“No, but I had this tamagotchi once that looked like a puppy.” Sadly, it kept dying on me, not that I would mention that fact right now.

I had the impression Hael tried really hard not to grimace. This was probably like handing the keys to a Lamborghini to a teenager whose only experience with driving was playing Grand Theft Auto.

“Since she is meant to be your guard,” Hael said, “she will stay with you in your rooms.” Clearly an unorthodox choice, judging by Hael’s expression. “You or someone else will need to take her outside once a day to do her business.”

I cast Hael an arch look. “I know that much about dogs.”

“Your tamagotchi kept dying.”

Dammit with the mind reading!

The demon sighed. “Let’s run through the commands she knows.”

We practiced for a good half hour until Hael seemed somewhat satisfied that I’d remember the basic commands and Vengeance would respond to me. She only ran into pillars twice, which I thought was admirable. I gave her a good scratch behind all six of her floppy ears for it, and her left hind leg made adorable phantom scratches along with my caress.

“All right,” Hael said, holding the whistle out to me.

I closed my hand around it and tugged, but Hael didn’t let go of the string attached to it yet. His gaze on the hound, expression slightly pinched, he heaved a deep breath.

“Hael?” I ventured.

A muscle ticked in the demon’s jaw. “Her favorite treat is dragon jerky.”

I really hoped that name was a euphemism. “I’ll make sure she gets it,” I said gently.

Hael let go of the whistle, turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

“So,” I said, facing my four-hundred-pound pet, “it’s just you and me now, girl. What do you say we go explore this joint a bit?”

Her middle head yipped while the others tried to chase her tail, resulting in her keeling over.



I WAS HIDING IN THE LIBRARY WHEN AZAZEL FOUND ME.

Vengeance and I had prowled the meandering halls of this ridiculously large mansion for what felt like at least two hours, and this time around I had the courage and leisure to actually try a few of the closed doors.

Rooms, rooms upon rooms, many of them empty of people—or rather, demons—and I just wondered what one could possibly want with that much space. Not all of them seemed to serve a specific purpose, although some did have a theme, like a game room, or what looked like a mini museum of sculptures. Most, however, were just fancy living rooms with places to lounge. Demons really liked their comfort, apparently.

While we walked the hallways, things still stirred high up in the gloom of the ceiling, and every now and then something would make a slithering or scuffing noise behind us. With my lion-sized, three-headed guard hound at my side, though, any creatures lurking in the shadows didn’t dare approach. Here and there Vengeance would let loose a half-threatening growl at something, and whatever had come too close to our path skittered away faster than I could spot it.

“Good girl,” I crooned and patted the wiry black fur on her flank.

Vengeance preened and wagged her tail.

I’d pictured running into the inferni again, was half-prepared to draw the dagger from its sheath at my hip while crouching behind my hound.

What I actually ran into, I wasn’t prepared for at all.

Or rather, whom.

I should have figured I’d see other demons milling about Azazel’s house. It was a large estate, after all, and his apparent rank and standing would mean he’d have a veritable army of employees and underlings. I did kind of figure this, sure, and I expected to maybe see Hekesha or Caleb crossing my path.

But no, of course the first demon I chanced upon was one from the room where we’d met with Zaquiel.

I rounded the corner and almost collided with a massive chest. Stumbling back, Vengeance pressing into my side and putting her heads in front of me, I peered up at the demon—the bartender I’d gotten drinks from.

“Well, hello,” he said, leaning against the wall with one shoulder. “Out for a stroll?”

Temporarily speechless, I nodded.

The demon studied Vengeance, whose muscles tensed under my hand. “That’s the first time I’ve seen a hound inside.”

“Bodyguard,” I said stupidly.

“Makes sense.”

I tried. I really tried. But it was like if someone told you not to think of a pink rhinoceros, and, of

course, all you could picture from then on was a damn pink rhinoceros.

And my brain, that unruly, misbehaving, could-never-even-get-it-to-meditate set of synapses and wayward electronic impulses, dutifully conjured up the way I'd rubbed myself all over Azazel in that room.

In excruciating detail.

The demon bartender blinked, raised a brow, and drawled, "Yeah, that was...delicious."

Fucking hell.

My face aflame, I mumbled some horrible mashup of "I need to go" and "Excuse me," shoved past him and speed-walked down the hallway in search of a hole to fling my embarrassed ass into.

Vengeance bounded after me, tongues lolling out her mouths. At least someone had fun.

First door I tried led me into a large circular room with soaring ceilings and bookshelves running along the rounded walls, stacked several stories high, with a gallery walk circling up from the ground. Several couches and armchairs sat in the center of the mosaic-inlaid floor, and I spotted more interspersed along the gallery.

I stopped and stared, the door falling shut behind Vengeance trotting into the room after me.

Gaze tracking the shelves, I let out a sound of helpless awe. There had to be thousands of books here. The only other time I'd seen that many in one place had been at my college library.

I turned in a circle, inhaled the distinct scent of old bindings and well-worn pages, and reveled in this surreal Beauty and the Beast moment.

I spent the next hour exploring the shelves, perusing the books—most of them in other languages, even other scripts—letting my fingers run over aged spines and pulling out a volume to leaf through its pages here and there, while Vengeance snored on one of the sofas.

Each shelf had a fancy, honest-to-God—honest-to-Lucifer?—ladder on wheels attached to it in order to reach the higher levels of that particular gallery floor, and I was perched on one of them, balancing to grab a book with a gold-inlaid spine, when a prickling sensation of dark, seductive energy ran up my back and tightened my nipples.

"Pity you're not wearing a dress," Azazel said from his spot at the bottom of the ladder, peering up at me.

Seeing him again was like a full-on sexual punch to my senses. How he'd gotten even more magnetically attractive, I had no idea, but one look at him, and I swayed on the ladder.

Instead of his fighting leathers, he now wore what appeared to be formal black pants and a tunic-style shirt in midnight blue, embroidered with silver thread at the open collar. The embroidery matched the lightning in his eyes, glinting in the shimmering glow of the lamps in the room—no torches for this precariously inflammable collection of literature.

The tunic stretched over his broad shoulders, the fine fabric and elegant cut a delicious juxtaposition to the barely leashed power whispering around him. As always, he seemed to compress the air in the room with his presence alone, a heavy weight of sheer, brute force dropped into surroundings that seemed too tame for his nature. He'd look totally in his element standing on a battlefield, sword in hand, armor splattered with blood, those impressive wings flaring behind his shoulders.

"There is a painting just like that," he said in a silken murmur, "in the north wing gallery. I can take you to ogle it to your heart's content."

I inhaled sharply and pointed at him. "That. Right there. I've had enough of it. Teach me to shield." I was fed up with being an open book for anyone to read.

"All right." He crooked a finger. I knew what that finger felt like stroking between my legs.

“Come on down.”

Now why did this sound like an erotic threat?

I perched my butt on one of the rungs of the slightly angled ladder. “I think I’m just fine right here.”

If I climbed down, with him standing at the bottom and looking at me like this—as if he wanted to peel me out of my clothes with only his teeth and a whole lot of determination—I’d probably jump him before I reached the last rung. I could just see it unfold. We’d never get to the shielding lesson, too busy testing the sturdiness of every available surface in this room.

“Suit yourself.” The glint in his eyes betrayed his nonchalant answer. He’d been looking forward to my jumping his bones, the ravenous rake.

He leaned a shoulder against the pillar that supported the gallery above us. “Have you ever meditated?”

I grimaced. “Does the one time count when I was too lazy to clean my apartment so I just lay on the couch for an hour and contemplated the exact ingredients of the takeout container that’d been sitting on the table for two days longer than was sanitary?”

Azazel slowly blinked. “Unless you focused on your breathing—”

“I *was* trying not to inhale too much,” I threw in. “I mean, the container wasn’t empty, if you catch my drift...”

“—or you used visualization,” he continued, ignoring my interjection with admirable grace, “then no.”

“I did visualize.” I pointed my finger at him. “I totally visualized that container dumping itself in the trash.”

He closed his eyes and dipped his head, and I had the niggling suspicion he was trying hard not to laugh.

“Visualization,” he said as he looked back up at me again, a hint of mirth softening the beautifully brutal lines of his face, “is a good start for shielding. In the beginning, you will need to imagine an actual wall around your mind, until the effect of it becomes an instinct you don’t even need to remember.”

“Okay.” I rubbed my nose. “Just a wall? What should it look like?”

“Whatever you want it to look like. Make it your own. Its size or form don’t matter as much as your faith in its protection. It could be a stained glass wall of rainbows and unicorns, but if you believe it to be impenetrable, then it will be.”

Pursing my lips, I nodded. *Faith*. I could do this. Even with his permission to imagine any kind of flimsy wall, I went for the picture of an impressively sturdy rampart. The kind that spanned several yards, thick and massive like the Great Wall of China, only stretching even higher. *Impenetrable*, I thought and focused on infusing the word with power.

“Good,” he said. “Now think something very...” He waved a hand. “...loudly. Don’t send it to me as if speaking mind to mind. Stray thoughts are different. Just let them run, but keep them behind the wall.”

Right. I narrowed my eyes and conjured up the memory of him pocketing my vibrator. My cheeks heated.

He smirked. “Ah, the suspense of not knowing what exactly put that look on your face. I rather like it.”

“So it worked?”

“I can make an educated guess about the nature of your thoughts based on your expression and

other bodily clues—” he indicated my chest, and to my dismay my nipples stood at attention “—but I don’t know for sure. I didn’t *see* your thoughts.” His smile was genuine, warm, and did funny things to my stomach. “Well done.”

The rush I got from his praise scared me just a bit.

“Now let’s see if your wall holds up under pressure.”

“Wait—what?” And dammit, now I had that Queen song stuck in my head.

“*Distraction* might be more apt.” He shrugged. “You won’t always be thinking of your wall, especially if you’re active and other things happen around you. But it needs to be there, all the time, even without your focus on it. After all, you’ll need it the most when you’re around others. Your attention will be on them and whatever is going on, and you can’t afford to be mentally split trying to keep up your wall. It needs to stand on its own.”

That made sense. “Okay. So, distract me.”

His expression switched from calm instructor to hungry predator in a millisecond.

CHAPTER 14

OH, NO. I WALKED RIGHT INTO THAT ONE, DIDN'T I?

Pushing off the pillar, he closed the distance to the ladder with the quiet charge of a brewing storm. His hands grasped the black metal frame, his gaze intently fixed on me.

I swallowed, my heart thudding faster.

"I didn't know you were a Queen fan," he murmured as he took the first step up.

Dammit. I repaired the breach in my wall and stuffed *Under Pressure* playing on repeat back behind the rampart.

By now Azazel had taken more steps up the ladder. His face level with my crotch, he met my gaze with searing intensity.

My heart did its best to break through my rib cage, and I curled my fingers around the ladder's rung.

No man—not even a demon—had the right to project that much raw sex with just a look. It just wasn't fair.

Responding like dry kindling to a struck match, my body flared with heat. A well-known throb of desire settled at the apex of my thighs.

He inhaled deeply, his pupils dilating. "I love your scent," he said, his voice an erotic growl that hummed over my skin.

Without so much as a warning, he pressed his face against my crotch, his nose pushing right on the spot that craved pressure. I uttered a choked moan and gripped the ladder harder so I wouldn't just flow down, what with my knees having melted.

"I could bathe in it," he spoke against my mound, and it didn't matter that technically, there were two layers of fabric separating his mouth from my skin—the heat of his breath, the vibration of his deep voice, the sheer power of him so close to my pulsing core, it might as well have burned away my clothes.

Wait, he wouldn't just—

"Don't you dare," I whispered, snapping my head down to peer at him.

"Dare what?" His expression was just short of on the wrong side of naughty, the fingers of his one hand stroking idly up my thigh, toward the aching center of my lust.

"Burn a hole in my—"

My sentence ended in a strangled groan of helpless pleasure as his mouth closed over my mound—and touched skin, the fabric seared off in between. I gasped for breath, my chest heaving as my head fell back against the ladder. Pleasure spiked where his tongue laved my folds, danced around my clit, teased my entrance.

I squirmed, panting, overwhelmed by the exquisite eroticism of being fully clothed except for that one spot in my crotch area where he sensually attacked my intimate flesh.

Oh, God.

He drew back, and chill air touched my wet folds.

I whipped my head down to stare at him.

“You need to stop thinking about God when I’m eating you out.”

Crap, my wall had crumbled again. Grinding my teeth, I rebuilt that sucker.

His eyes glittered. “You’ll have to keep it up if you want to come.”

I glowered down at him. “That’s unfair.”

“No, it’s an incentive.” He leaned forward and licked over my still heated flesh, making me shudder. “Anytime your wall fails, I’ll stop.”

I contemplated going for that dagger still strapped to my hips. My fingers flexed.

“If you keep the wall intact while my mouth is on you,” he said with a chuckle as he kissed my clit, “I’ll make you come so hard that I’ll have to carry you down this ladder in a boneless heap.”

I whimpered, my bones doing some pre-melting already.

His tongue flicked through my folds again, and my arousal skyrocketed. Closing his lips over my clit, he sucked. My hand shot out and tangled in his hair. He snarled his approval as he went to town, letting me feel his teeth in between generous licking and suckling.

I’d never understood the appeal of riding a guy’s face before, but I could learn to channel my inner cowgirl with how he worked me over.

He stopped.

With a whine, I glanced down at him.

He was resting his head on my still jeans-clad inner thigh, his expression hidden, his shoulders shaking. Was he—

“Cowgirl?” he asked in a strangled voice.

Dammit! I fixed up the holes in my mental wall.

He was still laughing quietly when he put his mouth on me again.

And so it went, on and off, on and off, in excruciating sensual torture until I was so high-strung with desperate, unfulfilled desire, it was a miracle I didn’t simply snap like an overdrawn rope.

“Pleeeeeeease,” I wheezed, sweat slicking my skin.

“It’s up to you, love,” was his pragmatic, unyielding answer. “You know you can do it.”

“I hate you,” I murmured as I clenched my hand in his hair and pulled him closer.

A husky laugh against my intimate flesh. “No, you don’t.”

Ugh.

Checking the wall in frustration, a cursory, instinctive pat-down of my defenses, I let myself fall into that place of mounting arousal, with the single-minded focus of getting the fuck off.

If this wall fell down again, I would commit a bloodbath.

“There now,” Azazel purred against my mound as I writhed underneath his skillful tongue. “You’re doing great.”

God, I needed relief as bad as a junkie did their next fix.

He kept nipping and lapping at me, and I gasped—he hadn’t caught that thought!

Yessss. The wall held. It held, it held, it held—

He grazed my clit with his teeth and sucked.

I came with a scream. The orgasm razed me down to my foundations, a violent force of long-awaited pleasure. So sweet, so torturous, so charged that it veered into pain—which only hurled me

further into bliss. Convulsions rattled my body, and I would have crumpled down the ladder had he not held my hips in place.

Spots of light danced in my vision, and I barely noticed as he turned me around, one arm slung around my waist and cushioning me against the ladder. His lips on my neck, his chest pressing into my back. He'd climbed up, was now right behind me, caging me in against the ladder.

"You're not quite boneless yet," he murmured into my ear. "Let me remedy that."

"I think I'm boneless enough." My voice was hoarse. "I'm practically a chicken nugget."

"If you can still speak, I haven't done my job."

His free hand slid down to my jeans, popped open the button. The zipper followed suit. I shivered under the caress of his mouth on my neck as he grabbed the waistband and pulled both jeans and panties down to my knees in one skilled move. The raw carnality of that act only rekindled my lust, and despite my semi-boneless state, I managed to push my hips back—right up to the hard length of his own arousal, still trapped behind his pants.

Biting my lip, I rubbed against it. The hiss it elicited from him was the sweetest reward.

He drew back a little, and I felt his hand between us. A few quick, efficient moves, and then he pressed against me again, this time skin to skin at our hips. I gasped at the feel of his cock against my butt, fresh desire pooling in my core.

The fingers of his free hand slid between my thighs—slick with my arousal—right up to my entrance, dipped inside me. I moaned and let my head fall back against his shoulder. He pumped in and out for a few heartbeats, his breath hot on my jaw, before he withdrew his hand. Grasping his cock, he positioned it between my thighs, right where my legs met my butt, and spread me as much as possible with the jeans still tangled around my knees.

Our position and the angle made it an especially tight fit...and all the more damnably erotic as he pushed forward. I tilted my hips to guide him a little, groaned as he slid home.

Sweet mercy. I was a second away from coming already. If he touched my clit now...I'd explode.

The arm cushioning my front moved up, his hand shoving down my tank top and bra to expose my breast. He pulled his hips back and thrust forward again at the same time as he squeezed my breast, thumb flicking my nipple.

I held on to the rungs for dear life, my entire body aflame. Breath coming in short pants, I melted into his hold as he fucked me against the ladder. Harder, faster, his mouth at my neck, heat and teeth and hunger, a storm of lust and feral need.

The touch of his fingers on my mound, pressing down on my clit—and I unraveled.

With a keening moan, I came with a ferocity that shattered me. He snarled and bit my neck, pumping ever faster into me until he followed me over the edge with a deep groan that curled my toes.

For the span of several heartbeats, he leaned against me, pressing me into the ladder—with his arm still serving as cushion—his face buried in my neck. The quiet of that moment was a hundred times more intimate than the sexual connection we still had, with his cock still buried inside me, my inner muscles clenching in aftershocks.

Clothes rustled as he drew back, pulled out and fixed his pants. Still holding me upright with one arm, he quickly dabbed between my legs with a tissue he must have summoned. Always so considerate and thorough, I mused.

I startled at the sound of susurrations, but the next second he'd lifted me, one arm under my knees, the other at my back, and I realized he was using his wings to balance on the ladder as he held me.

One mighty flap, and we were down on the floor. His wings vanished with a whoosh, and I made a soft sound of disappointment.

He peered at me, a brow raised in question.

They're pretty. I had to mentally push the words to him, because he'd actually done his job well and rendered me temporarily incapable of using my mouth to form words.

"Pretty." His narrow-eyed stare spoke volumes, but even so, he brought the wings back out, flaring them for extra effect as he walked over to one of the couches and sank down with me still in his arms.

What was left of my jeans and panties went up in flames and fell to ash under his hand, the dagger plopping down on the couch. I jerked upright.

"Shh."

A blanket appeared in his hand, and he wrapped it around me, pulling me back against his chest. His wings slightly curled around us, the glossy black feathers shimmering with iridescent flames.

"Are you cuddling with me?" I muttered.

"I'm making sure you won't flow into a puddle on the floor." His chest vibrated against my cheek as he spoke. "The merihem would have a hard time cleaning that up."

The merihem. I frowned. "Is that what the gremlins are called?"

"Gremlins?"

"The little guys running around cleaning stuff and bringing me food."

He chuckled. "Yes. They're not gremlins. Gremlins wreak havoc on Earth. Merihem are lesser demons, a hellborn species that came into being after the Fall."

"Wait—gremlins are real?"

"Rare, but real, yes. They like to cause engine failures in big machines. Not exactly fans of new technology."

I craned my neck to look up at him. "You're shitting me."

A wicked smile stole onto his face. "Got you for a second, though."

"Ugh."

I went to mock-slap his shoulder, but he caught my wrist, brought it up to his mouth and kissed my palm, his quicksilver eyes intently focused on mine. I shivered despite the warmth of the blanket.

"So violent," he muttered, leaned down and captured my mouth in a kiss that melted my brain.

It took me a good minute after he broke the kiss to regain my faculties. I blinked, sorted through my jumbled thoughts and found the question I'd wanted to ask before.

"So are the merihem slaves?"

"No." He played with my hair. "They are compensated for their work, and they are free to leave and offer their services to another demon."

My brows drew together. "But half-bloods don't have that choice?"

"Ah, yes. That's a bit more complicated."

"Why?" From all that I'd seen, half-bloods should have more standing than merihem.

"Because they have familial ties to a certain demon and their bloodline. With that comes a claim to their loyalty and obedience. Family is...a complex issue among demons." His features darkened. "You owe allegiance to your line, and that allegiance comes with constraints on your freedom and choices."

"You mean your family owns you?"

"In a way."

"So they what? They say jump, and you have to jump?"

Something hard glittered in his eyes. "The more so when you're younger."

"That's messed up."

I thought of my father, and all the drama and pain when he'd decided to leave us for his second family, and I was infinitely grateful I had the choice to live with my mom and cut him out of my life. Did it hurt to turn down his repeated attempts at contact years later? Of course. But it was my choice, my only bit of control in a scenario that pulled the rug out from under my feet and ended my childhood years too soon.

The thought of someone—him, or the rest of my family—ordering me to keep in touch with him, essentially taking my right to determine at least this part of the debacle...the idea alone chafed. I couldn't imagine having relatives practically dictate other parts of my life as well.

"Who's your family?" I asked into the ponderous silence. Who held such rights over him?

His gaze flicked to mine, something hard and implacable glimmering within. "My line goes back to Daevi. She's an original Fallen, and she's the archdemon of this territory."

Okay... I waited, because the weight of his words indicated there was more to this. Much more.

When he didn't elaborate, I raised a brow and carefully asked, "And did Daevi found an entire family like Zeus birthed Athena from his head?"

He narrowed his eyes.

"I mean," I went on, "unless you guys can reproduce by fragmentation like sponges—"

Lightning flashed in his gaze.

"—then it takes more than one demon to have offspring. So your line goes back to Daevi and..."

Waving my hand in an encouraging manner, I let the rest of the sentence hang there.

He stared at me. A world of reticent defiance lay in that stare. His power seemed to replace the air in the room, and every breath made me inhale the raw force of Azazel in full-blown brooding mood.

It was quite impressive, as far as masculine sulking went.

"Fine," I sighed. "You don't want to talk about it—we won't talk about it. Just to let you know, though, I get it. Family stuff can be shitty, and I know what it's like to pretend one side of your family doesn't exist." I fiddled with the edge of the blanket. "The closer they are to you, the more it hurts when they betray you, so it makes sense that family has the potential to wreck us the most."

The silence that followed was charged with the hum of his power and the quiet snoring of Vengeance on the couch to our left. I felt his every breath where my head lay on his chest, the thump of his heart a steady beat sinking into my skin.

"Thank you for installing a sprinkler system in my rooms," I said after a while. "Mephistopheles wasn't amused, but I appreciate it."

"You're welcome." His voice a deep rumble, he started playing with my hair again. After a moment he added quietly, "Lucifer."

"What?"

"My line goes back to Daevi and Lucifer."

I sat up so fast, my head spun. Gaping at him, I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it again. "You're related to Lucifer? *The* Lucifer? Ruler of Hell?"

He nodded, his expression sour.

"Wha—what kind of relation? Like, how close?"

A muscle feathered in his jaw. "Two generations."

"He—" I cleared my throat. "He's your grandfather?"

"My mother's father, yes."

Holy shit. Ho-ly shit.

I was related to Lucifer by marriage. The Devil was one of my in-laws.

The motherfucking *Devil*.

My mind just blanked. I couldn't...process.

"Zoe?"

I stared past him.

He waved his hand in front of my face. "Hell to Zoe. You there?"

I didn't respond.

Sighing, he shifted on the couch, reaching into his pocket. The next second he wiggled a small object in front of my face and said with surgical precision, "I carried this around all day with your delicious fragrance on it, and more than one demon sniffed the air around me like a hound who's scented blood."

My gaze focused on the vibrator in his hand, and heat shot into my face. "Ugh! Give me that."

I tried to snatch it away from him, but he raised his arm out of my reach, tutting. "What are you going to do to earn it back?"

"*Earn* it back?" If looks could incinerate, he'd be a pile of ash. "It's mine, you stole it. Now give it back."

"Mine, yours..." He peered at the vibe and pursed his lips. "...ours."

I crossed my arms. "I didn't know you had a thing for vibrators, but if you want it for your own use so badly, go ahead, have at it. I'll let you borrow it for a while." I waved at it with one hand. "I can recommend setting number two, it has the best vibe rhythm."

He smiled. "Good to know. And you don't need to freak out about being related to Lucifer by marriage because it's of no consequence."

I blinked. "No consequence? Excuse me if I find that hard to believe. He's your grandfather."

"Who doesn't give a shit about me, and vice versa. I barely ever see him, not since Daevi claimed me as her own. Chances are low you'll ever meet him. I make it a point to avoid his attention."

I studied his face—features drawn tight, eyes hard—and asked quietly, "What did he do to you?"

The air around him shimmered. His smile twisted something in my stomach. "When Lucifer is angry, he physically rips someone apart. Limbs, we grow back without a trace of injury. When he's coldly furious, however, he finds other, more permanent ways to hurt someone. Something that will leave invisible scars." He tapped his temple. "When he brought me to his court, his fury was such that it chilled the air. The object of his wrath was out of his reach, but I...I was a mirror image of the one who'd inspired the kind of cold hate in Lucifer that made the walls frost over."

"So he hurt you?"

"He never laid a hand on me. He didn't have to. No need to strike me when he could instead publicly eviscerate the only demon to have shown me kindness at his court, as a punishment and a warning for others. After that, everyone else made sure to treat me with the sort of contempt that wouldn't arouse Lucifer's ire."

I shook my head, trying hard to piece things together and wrapping my mind around the kind of abuse he hinted at. "Wait, so who was Lucifer really mad at? Your mother, or your father?"

"Father. Azmodea is the one who takes after our mother, and it saved her from Lucifer's fury."

I hesitated, my throat raw. "What happened to her? Your mom?"

His gaze rested on an errant lock of my hair. Twining it around his finger, he said, "We should get going."

"Where?" I didn't comment on his obvious evasion of my previous question. He'd tell me when he was ready.

"Earth," he said simply. "For your visit."

Drawing back, I blinked at him. “Now?”

“I have time. I have taken care of my duties for today and am not currently needed here. I can take you to see your friend and your mother.” His silver gaze met mine. “Unless you don’t want to?”

I sat up straighter, my heart pounding. “No, I mean, yes, of course I do.”

Throwing back the blanket, I stood up and froze, cool air tickling my skin from the hips down. When I turned to him, he was already holding a new set of panties and jeans.

“I hope you’ll be replacing the ones you keep incinerating,” I said as I pulled them on. “Or else I’ll run out of clothes to wear.”

His face took on a speculative look.

Oh, no. I kept walking into it, didn’t it?

Pointing a menacing finger at him, I snarled, “Don’t.”

He smiled. It was equal parts disarming and worrisome.

Pants in place, I moved toward the door. “All right, I’m ready. We can leave.”

I was halfway across the library floor when I realized he wasn’t following. I stopped and turned on my heel.

Azazel was still lounging on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees, hands loosely clasped together. He jerked his head at me. “Come here.”

Gingerly, I walked back to him. “Are you going to give me a speech? Because you look like you’re going to give me a speech.” *About what?*

“Sit.”

I perched on the armchair opposite the couch.

“You won’t leave this room.”

I drew back. “The what now?”

“Not physically.” Fire licked over his wings. “Your body, the one you were born with on Earth, was bound to Hell the moment I brought you down here. It cannot leave this realm anymore, or it will disintegrate and you will die.”

“Then...how will I travel to Earth? You said I could.” My voice rose along with my adrenaline.

He held up a hand in a placating gesture. “And you will. Just not with your physical body. You’ll have to leave it here. Ever heard of astral projection?”

I nodded.

“It’s sort of like that. Humans differ from demons and angels among other things in terms of metaphysical makeup. You have a soul and an earthly, mortal body, and the two are entirely separate entities. When you are born, your soul is poured into this physical body, which will be its container, its vessel, for your mortal lifespan. Upon your death, your soul leaves this body and is either ferried to Heaven, dragged to Hell, or, in some cases when a demon fails to grab the soul, roams Earth as a ghost. No matter what, though, the mortal body dies and remains on Earth while the soul lives on.”

I stared at him, hanging on his every word. This stuff was fascinating. I’d never been much of a real believer in religion, but like everyone growing up in a Christian-dominated society like the United States, I’d learned my fair share about Judeo-Christian mythology. To hear certain aspects of it confirmed—and to be living them—was a bit of a mind-bending experience.

“Contrary to the souls here in Hell,” Azazel went on, “you didn’t die a natural death and leave your body on Earth. In fact, you didn’t die at all. You’re still very much alive, down here, in your mortal body, which you brought with you. As I mentioned, that body is now bound to Hell courtesy of your contract with me and the fact you entered this realm with it alive and intact. But since, as a human, your soul is separable from your body, you can temporarily leave your physical form and

travel to Earth with the immortal, spiritual part of your being.”

“But there are limits, right?” I remembered him saying something along those lines when he first mentioned it.

He nodded, his expression grave. “The connection of your soul to your body is tenuous once you leave your physical form. If you stay separated too long, the link will sever, your body will die, and your soul will be trapped on Earth.” He paused, his gaze thoughtful. “And because of the way you entered this realm in the first place, it is not quite clear whether you’d be allowed back in even as a damned soul. You’d be barred from Heaven as well.”

I sucked in air through my teeth. “I’d be a ghost on Earth?”

“At first.” He grimaced. “Maybe. Again, your case is different from other humans and their regular deaths, but even with them...when they get left behind on Earth as ghosts, eventually they all turn into something...darker. There are ghosts, and then there are wraiths.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Lost souls on Earth start out as ghosts,” he elaborated. “And at first, they are more or less who they were in life, with all their memories and their personality intact. They often linger around the places they’ve lived, with the people they knew, and most of them are benign. They are not there to cause trouble, they’re simply lost.”

I was waiting for the But.

“But over time,” he continued, “they deteriorate. They lose their memories, they forget who they were, where they are, until all that is left of them is confusion that manifests as uncontrollable anger. And then they start destroying things and hurting people.”

“Sounds like poltergeists.”

He gave a solemn nod. “Yes, that is one of the terms humans have coined for them.”

“Okay.” I blew out a breath. “So no staying too long, or I’ll end up as a horror movie prop. Got it. Anything else?”

“You’ll be solid and visible to me, but unless you choose to show yourself, no one will be able to see you, and while you can affect the physical world with touch, you won’t feel it. You won’t smell or taste anything either.”

It took a moment, but then it sank in. I pressed my lips together, his words clanging in my mind. Swallowing, I turned my head and blinked against the sudden, unbidden prickle of tears behind my eyes. “When you said I could visit,” I whispered, “you didn’t mention I’d be a ghost.”

Because I would be, for all intents and purposes. I’d have my body here in Hell, sure, but during the visit I’d be little more than a spiritual leftover from my old life, sneaking a peek at a world I’d never again be a part of.

“I said you could see them. And you will.”

“Yes, but not like—” My voice sounded awfully close to breaking. “I just thought—”

“What *did* you think?” Gentle, his tone was so gentle, despite the words being far too real, too raw, cutting too deep into parts I didn’t want to acknowledge. “How did you think this was going to go? You disappeared.” He snapped his fingers. “How did you imagine you would come back from that for a short visit, without your family and friends asking questions you can’t answer?”

“I could have—I don’t know. I could have told them I’d gotten a job somewhere else, and I’m super busy and won’t be able to see them as often and...” I trailed off, my stomach cramping.

“And how would that have gone for you?” he asked softly. “Be honest. Run it through in your mind. You wouldn’t be able to keep up that lie, because you have no way to actually stay in touch with them. Hell is a different realm, communication with Earth isn’t possible—no phones, no email,

no internet. We can only visit through the hellgates, and even if you were able to travel with your physical body, the pretense wouldn't work. Because how would you explain to your mother that you'll show up out of the blue every now and then, no record of you flying into the country, no calling ahead to let her know you're coming, and you can't even stay for a night, not to mention longer?"

My eyes prickled hot, and an uncomfortable ache built in my chest.

"In a world of instant communication and global connection, you would be completely unreachable for weeks and months, something you could not explain away even if you told them you joined a Buddhist monastery in Nepal. Even monks have cell phones and email now. No matter where you said you moved to, they'd expect you to have an address they could at least send a birthday present to. You could provide them with none of that. And when they ask about your new life, you'd have to lie to them, every time, straight to their face, for the rest of their natural lives, while you'll outlive them, never aging, never changing. Your entire existence would have to be wrapped in one lie upon the other, and over time, it would break you."

My throat was tight and scratchy, the burn of tears all the more threatening after he so succinctly laid out how naive I'd been.

"You didn't think it through," he said ever so softly, "and I understand why. But I think deep down you've known that you wouldn't be able to simply stroll back into the life of those you had to leave behind as if you're visiting from some exciting new job that took you into a faraway land out of reach of modern communication."

I furiously swiped at the damning tears spilling from my eyes.

He was crouching in front of me. I hadn't even seen him get up and come over, but now he was right there, his large frame taking up so much space and air even though he was at eye level with me, his power coiling about him on a tight leash. Slowly, he reached out and wiped at my cheek.

I brushed his hand away, anger like corrosive acid in my veins.

He clenched his jaw. "This is not something I have any say over. I can't make you have a solid, physical body to visit your loved ones with. I can't make up a new existence for you to explain your sudden absence and being incommunicado. I don't—" He seemed to chew on something unpleasant. "I don't have the kind of power to change human reality."

"You could have told me," I ground out. "You could have explained this to me before we even came down here."

"What difference would it have made? It wouldn't have changed your decision."

Because the alternative would have been to burn in Hell as a damned soul. But this wasn't about whether it would have influenced my choice at all.

"I wouldn't have clung to false hope!" My voice rose and wobbled precariously. A fresh sheen of tears threatened to cloud my vision. "All this time, I thought I could actually, truly visit my mom, talk to her, hug her, let her know I'm okay. And yes, maybe that was fucking naive of me, but I didn't know better and I clung to that belief, and now that it's gone—" I broke off, swallowing the sob that wanted to choke me. "False hope is the worst," I continued in a small voice. "Because it hurts all the more when you realize you never had a chance."

He didn't say anything, just regarded me with tense, quiet focus, and I turned my head, unable to hold the silent lightning of his gaze. Curling my hands to fists in my lap, I tried to blink the annoying tears away. Every breath was a shuddering ache in my chest.

His energy hovered so close, his presence a tempting lure for the irrational, small part of me that, right now, craved connection and touch and some form of reassurance despite, or maybe because of, how rawly vulnerable I felt. This nauseous cocktail of emotions inside me, this yearning

for...*something* from him, while at the same time my anger snapped at me like a snarling beast, demanding I snap and snarl at *him* in turn...it made me feel caught between implosion and explosion.

The touch of his hands on mine startled me. I still didn't look at him, too furiously stubborn, with myself, with him, with all the new, messed-up information I couldn't yet quite put in context.

With infinite patience and gentle strength, he unfolded first one clenched fist of mine, then the other. Rubbing his thumbs over my palms, he said in a halting tone of measured calm, as if trying out a sentence in a newly learned language, "I'm sorry for the hurt this caused you."

I looked back at him, surprise arresting my breath for a heartbeat. His expression sincere, he held my gaze as he brought my left hand up to his mouth and placed a kiss in the center of my palm, then did the same with the other.

I drew in a shaky breath. Something flipped in my stomach, my throat growing thick.

"If I could do it over," he added, his voice an intimate murmur, "I'd do it differently." The quicksilver in his eyes heated. "I'd do a lot of things differently."

I swallowed hard. "Okay," was all I had the wherewithal to get out. That cocktail of emotions in me had just gotten more complicated.

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. "Are you ready to go?"

"I guess."

"Close your eyes and lean back. I will help you separate your soul from your body."

Anxiety clenched me in its grip. Now that I was about to do it, this whole separating-soul-from-body thing suddenly seemed a lot more dangerous.

"Will it hurt?"

He tilted his head, his expression contemplative. "Define *hurt*."

"What?" I'd begun to lean back, but now I snapped upright again like a loosened catapult.

His sly smile tipped me off.

"Don't do that again," I snarled.

He had no business looking so boyishly charming with that grin of his. "Deep breath in, deep breath out. Close your eyes."

I did, though not without giving him a good glower first.

"That place where you just felt anger, tap into it. Feel it. Soul is emotion. It's the force beyond our senses—"

"If you're telling me to search my feelings and levitate an X-wing next, I'm going to call you on your bullshit."

He nipped at my fingers. "Focus."

"Okay, okay."

I leaned back and followed his instructions on how to find the core of my soul. Much like meditation or deep relaxation, it involved getting to a place of ultimate introversion with the tricky part being not to fall asleep. Instead, I had to sort of slowly peel off the purely mentally feeling aspect of myself from the physical, as if pulling a sticker from a wall without damaging either the sticker or the wall.

As he'd promised, he helped me, which was at the point of last contact of the soul with the body. A weird, dream-like feeling had taken a hold of me, the world falling away for a moment.

"Open your eyes."

I did. I was standing in front of the armchair, my hands—looking just slightly translucent—clasped in Azazel's...and my body was slumped in the chair. Right there. In front of me. The surreality of it messed with my mind.

I could see my own chest rise and fall slightly. “I’m still breathing?” I asked. My voice sounded superimposed, like a voice-over for a movie, without any of the echo or other sound interactions that would normally occur if spoken in a room.

“Your physical body is in a sort of coma right now,” Azazel replied. “It will remain functioning until either your soul returns to it and you keep on living, or the link gets severed.” He snapped his fingers. “Vengeance.”

The hellhound was awake and on her paws in the next second, all three heads focused on Azazel.

“Guard her.” He pointed at my body.

With a wag of her tail, Vengeance trotted over to the armchair and lay down at my comatose body’s feet.

“It’s highly unlikely any harm would come to your physical form here,” he said, “but your hound is extra insurance.”

I nodded and crouched in front of Vengeance. “Good girl.” I ruffled the fur on one of her heads...and felt it. Turning back to Azazel, I raised my brows. “How do I—”

“It’s because she’s part of this realm, like me. As long as you’re in Hell, you’ll feel and sense everything. Once you’re on Earth, some of the normal physical impressions will be limited, as I mentioned.”

I was so not looking forward to that part.

“Come,” he held out his hand.

I took it, marveling at the fact I could see his skin through the translucency of my own spiritual hand. This was going to be very, very weird.

“Who do you want to see first?” he asked.

“Taylor.”

He heaved a sigh. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

CHAPTER 15

AZAZEL'S MIGHTY WINGS BEAT THE AIR AS WE MADE OUR DESCENT TOWARD THE HELLGATE. A different one than the one he'd brought me through that fateful night of my birthday. Azmodea's gate was close enough to San Francisco for Azazel to use it to pick me up and take me to Hell, but Taylor lived in Australia...neither Azmodea nor Azazel held control over a gate in the vicinity of Sydney.

Which meant we had to fly into another demon's territory and use their hellgate—for a price.

Apparently Azazel had called ahead to ask permission and announce his arrival. If a high-ranking demon simply showed up in another's lands, as he explained to me, it could be seen as an unprovoked violation of territory and might lead to an altercation. Of course, this also meant we had a welcome wagon waiting for us as we neared the gate.

Slightly translucent and mainly spiritual as my form might be, Azazel still had to carry me as if I was solid—to my disappointment, I couldn't fly on my own—and I clutched him tighter as two winged shapes dropped to our height and flanked us on both sides.

"Our escort," Azazel murmured in my ear. "They're mostly for show."

I glanced at the demons flying alongside us, clad in fighting gear that proclaimed they meant business if push came to shove.

Azazel banked, and we landed in a courtyard ringed by squat buildings reminiscent of the famous Ishtar Gate of Babylon. The blue-glazed bricks covering the walls reflected the light of the torches, the flames dancing over reliefs showing mystical beasts like dragons—although given the reality of this realm, they probably weren't mystical.

The architecture was beautiful and intimidating all at the same time, a simultaneous statement of splendor and military might.

Our escort landed next to us, their wings rustling as they were folded in a resting position behind the demons' backs. Azazel was about to stride for the hellgate looming in the middle of the courtyard, built in the same defensively aesthetic style as the surrounding structures, as a voice rang out behind us.

"And what's that you're carrying, I wonder?"

Azazel halted, his jaw locking tight. With a sigh, he turned and set me down.

Don't speak, he told me mentally.

"Elerion," he said out loud, and inclined his head.

The male demon he addressed stepped out of the shadows of an alcove. With his elegantly cut features, he looked like he'd be the favored model of the next New York fashion show, making designers fall over themselves to put him in their clothes. The way he moved clearly said he knew it too. He carried himself with the sure knowledge of his own beauty, used to wielding it like a blade.

His dark hair was cut short on the sides, longer on the top, some of the strands falling oh-so-carelessly over his forehead. Sharp jawline, high cheekbones, an amused smirk on his lips...but the most striking aspect of his face were his eyes, glowing orange-red like embers in a barely banked fire.

“Azazel,” he said, his tone cultured and precise. “I heard some rumors. Seems they’re true.” He tilted his head and peered around Azazel’s wings to catch a glimpse of me. “You’ve acquired an interesting pet.”

Azazel flared his wings slightly, obscuring me from Elerion’s view, and said in a voice that was dangerously nonchalant, “I would love to stay and chat, but I’m afraid my time is short. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be going now, as agreed upon in our negotiations for passage.”

“Ah, yes.” Elerion clucked his tongue. “And why would you be carrying a human soul to Earth?”

“My business is my business.”

“Hm. Curious business. Very...unusual. One might even say newsworthy. And you know what they say about the speed with which news travels.” A pregnant pause. “Especially to the palace of Lucifer.”

Fire licked over Azazel’s wings. His voice was deadly quiet. “What do you want?”

“A favor.”

The muscles locked in Azazel’s back. “Nothing that will bring harm to me or anyone in my care. Nor will I expose secrets that are not mine to tell. And should whatever you require conflict with my duties for Daevi, my loyalty will trump the terms of the favor.”

“Agreed,” Elerion said silkily. “You may proceed with your charge.”

Before I could catch another look at the other demon, Azazel turned, scooped me up again and marched toward the gate. He activated it with a series of furiously drawn sigils that lit up in the air for a second and then stepped through the glowing doorway.

The same suffocating darkness as I’d experienced during our first hellgate travel enveloped us again, pressure rose around us, pushed in from all sides, then a plop and Azazel stepped out on the other side of the gate.

I squinted against the bright light—more an instinctual reaction than necessity, as I realized a second later...because the sun didn’t actually blind me. Not in the ghostly soul form I was in.

Still, it was a shock to see sunlight after so much time without it. It glittered on the dew drops collected on the grass, turning the lawn of the park rolling out in front of us into a diamond-studded sea of emerald. All those colors. The verdant green.

So much *life*.

I inhaled—and uttered a bitter laugh. That’s right. I didn’t have to breathe. Not just that...I *couldn’t* breathe. No scents tickled my nose, the aroma of the lush natural scenery beyond the reach of my sense of smell. The leaves on the trees above us stirred in a breeze I couldn’t feel, and when I crouched and put my hand on the grass, I didn’t feel the touch of the blades.

“So this is what virtual reality must be like,” I muttered. Frowning, I turned to Azazel, who watched me with an inscrutable expression on his face. “How is it that I can see and hear, but my other senses—smell, touch, taste—are disabled?”

“My best guess,” he said quietly, “is that seeing and hearing are the senses a human soul clings to the most. They are the most dominant sensations you rely on, and echoes of these perceptive qualities may be available to the soul even without the input of a physical body. But I’m not sure.” He grimaced. “Not like there’s a manual for all this.”

I blinked at him in wide-eyed innocence. “Did the mighty Azazel just admit limits to his

knowledge?" I made a show of peering into the sky.

"What is it?" He sounded so resigned.

"Just checking for the flying pigs."

"You just missed them," he replied in a dry voice, "but if we hurry, we might make it back to my house before Hell has completely frozen over."

Funny how even without a body, I could have sworn I felt amusement curl in my belly.

My gaze caught on a jogger stretching his legs barely twenty yards from us, seemingly oblivious to the still glowing hellgate and the guy with huge black wings so close to him.

"They don't see us, or the gate?"

"The gate is entirely beyond their perception or reach," Azazel said, "and unless we choose to show ourselves, we're invisible to them." He tilted his head. "Where does your friend live?"

"What time is it here? And what weekday?"

"It's early Saturday morning."

"Okay, so she should be home." If it were during the week, she could already be on her way to work.

I rattled off Taylor's address in the affordable and comfy neighborhood somewhere toward the outskirts of the city. Azazel scooped me up once more and took to the skies.

It was weird how real and solid his form was to me, my fingers actually feeling his collar where I held on to him. The touch of his arms and hands where he grasped me was just like back in Hell, no strange phantom touch or missing sensation here. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck, inhaled...and his scent filled my awareness. The heat of his skin sank into me. When I licked over the pulse on his throat, I tasted him—the hint of sweat, the faint aroma of his soap, and the note that was purely Azazel.

In a world that was lost to my senses in this form, he was the one thing I could still touch, taste, and feel.

"Is it some form of compulsion?" he asked in a suspiciously light tone.

"What?"

"The licking when I'm flying you somewhere."

I drew back, and even in this form, an echo of my face heating from embarrassment rolled through me.

"I'm not complaining," he helpfully clarified, his voice dropping, bringing back flashbacks of what that sensual purr felt like against my inner thigh. "It's good to know that when I want your tongue on me, all I need to do is take you flying. I'll make sure to wear less next time."

The image of my mouth on his cock filled my mind—all the more damnably erotic because I hadn't gone there yet. With all the various times we'd tangled in the sheets—and on a ladder—I had somehow yet to pleasure him orally.

And now I couldn't think of anything else.

How it was possible to feel acute arousal without a body, I had no idea, but somehow my soul managed to hum with desire.

"Keep that up," he muttered, his grip tightening on me, "and we won't make it to your friend."

"You started it," I shot back. "Besides, would we even be able to...with me like this?"

His gaze of searing lightning met mine. "Never tried it." The smile sneaking onto his mouth was positively naughty. "Wanna be my first?"

I choked back a sound somewhere between a laugh and an eager groan. Hell, the idea of being the first sexual anything for him was deliciously tempting. Considering his age, there likely weren't many

firsts left.

“We don’t have the time,” I said, regret pinching me at the words. Seeing as this was my first visit to Earth, I needed to make the most of it. “Rain check?” I added with a flutter of my lashes.

“Tease,” he murmured and focused on the city below us, but the corners of his mouth kicked up.

He angled his wings to swoop down toward the apartment building I recognized from pics Taylor had sent me.

“That’s her balcony,” I said, pointing out the balustraded platform with a table and a set of chairs as well as a sad-looking palm which Taylor swore was determined to die on her despite her loving care. She’d sent me photos complaining about the traitorous plant. “You can land there and...wait, how do we get inside?”

“I thought we’d crash through the windows like some giant, confused bird and cover the floor in a shower of glass.”

“You’re kidding.”

He raised a brow. “Watch me.”

“No.” I glanced at the rapidly nearing building. “No!”

He wasn’t slowing down. The balcony and its glass door rushed closer at breakneck speed.

“Azazel!”

He snapped his wings half-closed, like a falcon in a killing swoop. We sped up even more. Only a few feet now until we hit the glass square on.

I shrieked.

The door swung open at the last second. Azazel flared and flapped his wings in a skilled slowing maneuver and hopped into the living room through the wide open balcony door. The sound of susurrations filled the room as he shook his wings and then retracted them.

Trembling, I slid down his front and rounded on him. “You jerk!”

Laughing quietly, he adjusted the sleeves of his tunic. “You wouldn’t have been hurt even if I did crash through the window. In your soul form, you can walk through walls.” He winked at me.

Ugh.

His face turned serious. “Remember I said you could choose to show yourself?”

I nodded.

“Don’t.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off.

“If you care about the mental health of your friends and family, you need to stay invisible. Like I said earlier, you’d have no way to explain your sudden reappearance, or the fact that you’ll need to vanish again in just a little while. As much as you long to talk with them and reconnect, seeing them from the safety of your own invisibility is the only viable option. It’ll have to do.” His gaze bore into me. “And if you try to tell them the truth, they’ll go mad.”

“Not Taylor.” I shook my head. “She already knows. Remember the séance?”

His features darkened. “I’m not the one who ever forgot it,” was his dangerously silken reply.

Right. I grimaced. “She was there with me. She’d have made her own pact—deal—whatever—” I waved a hand “—but she got scared when the lights flickered after I went first, and she bailed.”

His face was a mask of unforgiving hardness.

Touchy subject still, that whole séance contract thing.

“Anyway,” I said, rushing on past that particular self-destruct button. “The night you came to pick me up, I called her and told her about you.”

He narrowed his eyes. Dark power writhed around him like phantom shadows.

“What I mean to say,” I continued with just a touch of panic, “is that I won’t break her mind if I reveal myself to her. She already knows. She’s the *only* one who knows.” My voice brittle, I added, “The only one I can actually meet and talk to.”

The harshness in his features softened by a fraction, a minuscule crack in the hard mask of his anger. He stared at me for a long moment, then gave a single nod. “Fine. I’ll wait outside.” He jerked his head at the balcony. “You have an hour.”

“Thank you,” I whispered and watched him park himself in one of the chairs, eyeing the sad palm with a touch of pity.

Taking a bracing breath—I kept forgetting I didn’t need to breathe in this form—I turned toward the closed door in the opposite wall, leading most likely to Tay’s bedroom. She was an early riser, but glancing at the digital clock showed it was barely past six in the morning...a bit early even for Tay, especially on the weekend. Chances were she was still sleeping, and I just hoped she didn’t have company over.

Grimacing, I approached the door and tried the handle. My hand slipped right through it.

Dammit. Blasted ghost form.

You can walk through walls. Azazel’s earlier comment echoed in my mind.

Well, then. Let’s try that.

Closing my eyes, I stepped forward, right through the door. When I opened my eyes again, I stood indeed on the other side, a small, darkened bedroom greeting me.

Taylor was sprawled on her bed, wearing some sort of rainbow-dotted pajamas, the sheets half-tangled around her. Thankfully, she was alone. This whole thing would be a lot more complicated if she’d had someone over.

I bit my ghostly lip—not feeling it, which was another drop of weird in a sea of strangeness—and pondered how to do this. I didn’t want to give her a heart attack.

Maybe I could move something to wake her? Azazel said I could touch things if I focused, right?

I concentrated on a pillow lying on the floor and leaned down to pick it up, trying hard to imagine my fingers actually touching the material instead of slipping through. It took me eleven attempts, but I finally managed to gingerly scoop up the pillow and sort of levitate it in front of me with my ghost hands. I still didn’t feel it, which made for an interesting experience balancing the pillow and keeping it afloat.

No wonder a lot of ghost stories featured objects clattering around in often uncontrolled fashion—if this was the only way how ghosts could move things, it made sense those movements would appear clumsy.

Okay. This was going to be...a bit cliché.

I focused and slapped the pillow down on Taylor’s face.

She shot upright as if hit with an electric shock. Eyes huge and rounded, she whipped her head around to scan the room, her hand groping for the switch to her bedside lamp. Light spilled from the small lamp, and Tay frowned at the empty room.

Right, she couldn’t see me yet.

Focus, focus...

I knew the precise moment I became visible. Taylor’s shriek shook the walls.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” I held my hands out in a placating gesture. “It’s me! I’m real, I’m not a ghost—well, not really, I mean, in terms of appearance and walking through walls and such, okay, yes, I’m like a ghost, but I swear I’m not dead!”

“Zoe?” Tay clapped both hands over her mouth, her face white as chalk, her strawberry blond hair

coming undone from her messy bun.

“Yes.” I nodded and took a slow step closer, as if approaching a skittish cat. “I’m here. For a visit.”

Taylor closed her eyes. “Wake up,” she murmured. “Wake up, wake up, wake up...”

“You’re not dreaming. I’m really here. Look at me. Please.”

She opened one eye and peered at me.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” I said, “but I don’t have much time. I want to visit my mom next, and I can only stay so long here on Earth before the connection to my body in Hell gets severed and my soul becomes a ghost doomed to roam around here until I turn into a poltergeist and start smashing things and hurting people and I really don’t want to hurt people and—”

“All right, all right!” Tay held up a hand. “I believe you. No way I could come up with that much creative rambling in a dream.”

I grinned. “I miss you so much.”

Taylor took a trembling breath. “It’s really you. You’re...back. Oh, God.”

She threw the blanket off and jumped out of the bed, and the next second her arms closed around me.

Or...would have closed around me, had I been solid.

Instead, Taylor sort of ended up hugging herself. I stepped back just as she realized, her face crumpling.

“Yeah, about that,” I whispered.

She swallowed, shaking her head. “How?”

“Maybe you should sit down again.”

Dazedly, she nodded and plopped down on the edge of the bed.

I briefly explained about my body being bound to Hell and all that, her eyes growing wider the more I talked.

“My hands,” she said, curling and uncurling her fingers, “they’re in dire need of a full popcorn bowl to hold.”

I huffed a laugh. “So, anyway, he said I’ve got an hour, and—” I glanced at the digital clock on her nightstand “—we still have about forty minutes left.” My initial attempts to move the damn pillow had eaten up more time than I’d like.

“He.” Taylor raised a brow. “Your demon. Wait, excuse me—your demon *husband*.” She gave me the biggest I’m-going-to-need-you-to-elaborate-on-that look I’d ever seen.

“Yeah...” The word came out as a five-second-long syllable.

“Okay.” She held up a hand again. Taylor was very fond of handsy talking. “Okay. The last time we spoke, you were running from him and you sounded scared as hell.” She paused, considered. “Is that a bad pun to use?” Shaking her head, she went on, “And then you sent me this text—” she pointed a shaky hand at her phone on the nightstand “—this horrible goodbye text which I totally did not re-read every damn day like some weepy masochist, and I’ve been here, ever since, worrying about you and unable to talk to *anyone* about it because everyone else thinks you either just ran away or got human-trafficked or some shit, and I’m the only one who knows you actually got dragged to Hell by some lunatic demon who can’t take a joke—”

“That’s what I said!”

She glared at me.

“Right. Sorry. Go on.”

“—and I’ve been going crazy over here, Z, like straight-up certifiable and ready-to-be-committed

mad with all these whacky ideas of what you might be going through and—" She squeezed her eyes closed, her lips quivering.

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Taylor barely ever cried. She was the tough-as-nails one in our friendship. The one not afflicted by the angry-cry curse. I could count the number of times I'd seen her in tears on one hand.

"Tay?" I asked gently. "Tay, please don't."

She sniffed.

It felt like a cold knife to my heart.

"Don't cry," I whispered.

"I thought you were—you were—" Her voice was so broken, I couldn't stand it. "But you're okay. You're—wait, are you? Okay?"

I nodded vigorously. "I'm fine, Tay. Really. This form is just weird, that's all."

She was quiet for a moment. "Has he hurt you?"

"No," I said gently.

"But he's a demon. Who dragged you to Hell."

"He didn't actually drag me so much as carried me, and I kind of went willingly, considering the alternative would have been to burn in Hell as a damned soul."

She blinked.

"Neither of us had a choice," I explained. "We're both bound by that contract I made back then. And he's been...um..." I rubbed my nose, realizing—once again—that I couldn't feel it.

"What?"

"I mean, we had a bit of a rocky start, but now we're...uh...on good..." I waved my hands. "...marital...terms."

Her eyes rounded. "Oh, my God. Zoe Elizabeth Williams! *You're having sex with a demon?*"

"Shhh!" I made calm-down gestures and threw a glance over my shoulder. "Why don't you yell louder so the whole building hears you? He's right there on your balcony!"

"HE'S HERE?"

"Tay!"

"I can't believe you're screwing a demon," she stage-whispered. "*A demon!*"

"I know it sounds bad—"

"Wait—what does he look like?"

And there was the Tay I knew and loved. "Okay, so you know the demons from *Constantine*?"

"The movie with Keanu Reeves?"

"Yes."

She grimaced.

"He's nothing like that," I hurried to say. "I mean, there are ugly demon species down there, don't get me wrong, but Azazel and his kind...they're descended from fallen angels, and they all look the part. All of them."

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. "So on a scale of one to Tom Ellis as Lucifer..."

"He's off the charts. Like, not even on there." I made a *pew* sound and mimicked a rocket taking off. "Through the roof."

"And he's a literal demon in the sack?"

"Tay!" I laughed.

"Just making sure I get the details right." She wiggled her brows, then her face turned serious. "Okay, I'm gonna need you to walk me through it. The whole thing. Start with what happened after we

hung up that night. I wanna know everything.”

If I’d been in physical form, my eyes would have filled with tears, for the sheer relief of having someone to talk to about this. And not just *someone*...but my best friend, who understood and loved me unconditionally.

The words tumbled from me, each sentence a cathartic release, lifting a weight I hadn’t known I’d carried. Taylor listened, nodded, asked questions, made appropriate noises of disbelief or appreciation, and I wanted to hug her so badly for it.

“Thank you,” I said at last.

“For what?”

“Listening to my fantastical ramblings, being there for me.” I lowered my eyes. “I don’t have anyone else to tell this to. My mom...even when I go see her now, I can’t even show myself, let alone talk to her. She’ll never know what really happened.”

“I’m so sorry, Z. I can’t even imagine.” Her fingers flexed, and she curled them to a fist, as if resisting the urge to reach out and squeeze my hand. “I mean, it’s a blessing in disguise that you get along with that demon, but...losing your family like that...” She shook her head. “And here I was thinking that moving to Australia was hard, that I’d have to see if being that far away from my folks would work out in the long run. I can’t imagine never speaking to my mom or dad again, hugging my sister, or hanging out with old friends.”

I pressed my lips together. “I thought I’d come to terms with it,” I whispered. “But I’m not sure I ever will.”

“I get that.” She nodded slowly. “But hey—I’m here. You’ve got me. Anytime you need to talk, you just come right over, okay? No matter what, I’ll drop everything.”

“I want to tackle-hug you so hard.”

“Well, you can settle for another pillow slap if it makes you feel better.”

My smile was fragile. “Kinky.”

She shrugged, the hint of a grin on her face. “You know me.” Squinting at me, she added, “Speaking of kinky...you said your demon was here?”

“He’s waiting on your balcony holding a wake for your dying palm tree.”

“I want to see him.”

“Um...” I grimaced. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea...” I trailed off at the expression on Tay’s face. Crap. I knew that look. There was no reasoning with her.

She jumped up from the bed, marched over to her closet, pulled out a robe and put it on. Casting me a try-to-stop-me glance, she stomped over to the door, yanked it open...and stopped short, her gaze on the balcony.

“Didn’t you say he’s here?”

“Yeah, but he’s invisible,” I whispered behind her.

She fixed me with a stare over her shoulder. “Is this a case of ‘I totally have a hot boyfriend, but he lives in Canada’?”

I covered my face with my hand. “Tayyyyyy...”

She advanced on the balcony, and I hurried after her in a near panic. I could see Azazel lounge in his chair still, his head tilted toward the commotion in the living room, but judging by Taylor’s roaming gaze as she stepped toward the door, he hadn’t made himself visible yet.

This was going to be a disaster.

“Wait,” I hissed, and tried to hold her back, but of course my hands slipped right through her. Ugh.

Tay stood in the open door to the balcony, peering outside.

I saw the precise moment Azazel locked on to her. His gaze flicked to mine over her shoulder.

“Really?” He raised a brow.

“Is he still here?” Taylor whispered at me.

I gestured wildly in all directions instead of speaking.

“This is exactly why you shouldn’t show yourself,” Azazel said.

“Why isn’t he showing himself?” Taylor asked.

Lord help me.

“I’m not a party trick.” His voice was a low snarl.

“He doesn’t want to,” I said to her under my breath, hoping my tone conveyed enough warning.

Of course, Taylor being Taylor, she totally ignored that warning. “Why not?” Her eyes sparkled.

“Is he afraid?”

Oh, no. She *didn’t*.

Lightning flashed in Azazel’s eyes. He rose from the chair in one fluid, lethally graceful motion, his gaze fixed on Taylor, who still didn’t see him, given her lack of reaction.

I jumped right in front of her, my arms outstretched toward Azazel. “Don’t!”

Dark power pulsed from him as he closed the distance, his eyes glowing with an inner fire beyond the swirling quicksilver I’d come to know. Grasping me around the waist, he lifted me with effortless strength and deposited me behind him before I could so much as squeak.

Azazel loomed right in front of Taylor now, shadows writhing about his body. Her eyes darted back and forth—then stilled and focused on him. She sucked in a breath and stepped back.

“You wanted to see me?” he purred.

Slack-jawed, Tay stared at him.

I peered around him to glance at his face. Good God. He’d amped up the mesmerizing factor of his hard-cut beauty to a dazzling degree. I wasn’t even looking at him directly, and I wanted to sink to my knees and worship his masculine perfection.

Tay gaped, obviously thunderstruck.

He tickled her under her chin. “Demon got your tongue?”

She uttered a sound of helpless awe.

“Azazel,” I ground out and tugged on his arm.

He dipped his head and looked at me from under his lashes. “Did you think I was going to hurt her?”

“I…”

“She’s your best friend and your only confidante. She could be trying to knife me, and I wouldn’t harm a hair on her head.” He shrugged. “I’d simply bedazzle her.”

“Like you’re doing now?”

His smile was blindingly brilliant. Taylor sighed.

“Quit it,” I hissed.

“I do have to make a good impression on your best friend.”

“I think you have—”

“Earn her seal of approval, and all that.”

“Stooooooooop.”

“As you wish.”

I felt the shift in energy as he pulled his power back into himself. The shadows retreated into his skin, the magnetic allure of his beauty toned down to normal levels. Which were, of course, still heart stopping in their effect.

Leaning back against the balcony railing, he slid his hands into the pockets of his pants and winked at me. I gave him major side-eye in return.

Taylor blinked, shook her head, and took a deep breath. She studied Azazel from head to toe and back up again, then turned to me.

“Girrrrrrl.”

“I know.”

“That’s...”

“I know.”

She nodded, her brows raised, lips pursed. Facing Azazel again, she asked, “Do you have a brother?”

“Tay!”

“Sister,” Azazel smoothly said.

Taylor seemed to ponder that. “I remember, Zoe mentioned that. Is she gorgeous like you?”

“*Tay!*”

“As her brother, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the looks of my sister, but she’s never lacked for suitors.” He tilted his head to me, a glint of humor in his eyes. “Zoe here may be able to give you a better assessment of Azmodea’s attractiveness.”

“Wow, look at the time,” I shouted.

“Well, if she’s half as fine as you are,” Taylor said to Azazel, “a girl might just consider switching sides...”

“Shouldn’t we be leaving?” I asked with a hint of desperation.

“I also have a nephew,” Azazel threw in.

Taylor’s face lit up. “Oh, that’s right, Zoe told me about him. Yummy Mammon, right?”

Azazel leveled a stare at me.

“*I feel like we really should be leaving!*” I flailed wildly.

“Please tell Mammon I’m open to some demon possession of my own.” Taylor fluttered her lashes.

“Byyyyyyyyy!” I grabbed Azazel’s arm and tried to pull him away. Of course, it was like trying to move a tank.

I turned to Taylor. “It was great to catch up with you, but we must be going now. I’ll be back when I can, ‘kay?” To Azazel I said under my breath, “We’re leaving. Now.”

“We still have a few minutes.” His eyes twinkled.

“Now!”

He sighed. “Pleasure meeting you, Taylor.”

“Mhm.” She cocked a brow. “Say hi to Mammon for me.”

With a wink, he extended his wings. They flared over the railing of the balcony behind him, fire licking over the gleaming obsidian feathers.

“Whoa!” Taylor stumbled back, her eyes huge.

“Show off,” I muttered.

He beckoned me with a crooked finger. “Hop on, babe.”

Babe? Oh, he was laying it on *thick*. “I swear, if you start calling me bae...” I growled.

His grin was all sorts of wrong.

Facing Taylor again, I said, “I love you, Tay. Feel hugged.” I blew her a kiss.

“Ditto, Z.”

I turned to Azazel and waited for him to scoop me up with one arm under my knees and the other

behind my back, as usual, but he made no move to pick me up.

His smirk caused a flutter in my ghostly stomach. "I said, hop on."

Oh, you—

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed hold of his tunic, jumped up and slung my legs around his waist. He caught me with his hands under my butt, wicked amusement playing over his features.

"I'll get you back for that," I pressed out.

"I'm aquiver with fear." With his hands on my ass, he pushed my hips closer to him, right against the unmistakable hardness at his groin.

My fingers dug into his neck, arousal flooding my ghostly form.

"Get a room," Taylor said laughing.

"Why get a room," Azazel muttered, "when we can just do this?"

By now I recognized the telltale prickle that accompanied switching between visibility and invisibility—somehow Azazel brought me along with him as he made the change.

"That is equal parts cool and weird," I heard Taylor say—right before Azazel let himself fall backwards over the railing.

Still holding on to me, he snapped his wings closed, and we plummeted down.

I shrieked, grabbing him tighter, my legs holding his hips in a vise grip.

Ghost form or no, instincts made sure I died about a thousand deaths in the few seconds of free fall before he flared his wings out and shot upward again with powerful beats.

His mouth at my ear, he murmured, "That's what you get for *Yummy Mammon*."



"RIGHT THERE, THE HOUSE ON THE CORNER LOT," I SAID, POINTING TO THE SMALL SINGLE-LEVEL HOME that was just a step above a trailer as Azazel swooped low over the little town.

After we'd gone back to Hell through the gate in Sydney, he flew me to yet another demon's territory, since Azmodea's gate in the east of the San Francisco Bay Area was hundreds of miles away from Forest Grove, the little town on the suburban outskirts of the Portland metropolitan area in Oregon.

Thankfully, the demon whose gate we had to use this time wasn't interested in why Azazel needed access, and we proceeded to Earth without issue.

Now Azazel shot me an arch look. "You do realize I'm familiar with your mother's house?"

"Why—" I broke off and glared at him. "You watched me?"

"I checked in on you every once in a while," he corrected, "in the never-dwindling hope that you might marry before your twenty-fifth birthday."

"Perv."

"You weren't that interesting as a teenager," he said matter-of-factly. "And I never watched you in your room." His lips twitched. "Not until after you went off to college."

"What?"

His voice was all innocence. "Had to keep a closer eye on you as you approached your mid-twenties."

Ah, yes, to manipulate my boyfriends into proposing. I was still sore about that. But right now, the other implication of what he said riled me up far more—while it also irritatingly aroused me, not that I'd ever admit it. "How much exactly," I gritted out, "did you watch me?"

A smug smile snuck onto his face, and his voice dropped to a sensual purr. “Enough to know how you like to be touched.”

I probably should have been scandalized. And I would have been. Totally. I’d have mustered up real outrage about his unethical snooping...if I wasn’t so much in favor of the result.

He landed in a whirl of wings and set me down right in front of the door to the small backyard just as I heard my mom’s voice.

I froze where I stood.

The window to the kitchen was open, allowing parts of her conversation to float outside. As if in a trance, I stepped closer, looked inside.

My mom sat at the small kitchen table, her phone at her ear. Her hair, the same dark brown as mine, only cut shorter, was tousled, as if she’d run her hand through it a hundred times today. The last few years had brought her a few wrinkles, but now her face appeared haggard, the lines deepened, her skin pallid. She seemed to have aged years since I last saw her.

Even in my spirit form, the echo of my heart cringed at her sight, at the sorrow and grief that hung about her like a heavy mantle.

“No,” she said, her voice hoarse. “No, I do understand, but—” She paused, and her features tightened. “She wouldn’t just leave. Maybe you could—” She closed her eyes, her free hand on the table clenching to a fist. “Please, if you could just send another officer to question—yes, I know. I get that. I just think—” She paused again, swallowed. Her tone turned bitter. “I’ll have a nice day when I know what happened to my daughter.”

She glared at the phone, the call apparently ended, and let the device fall to the table, burying her face in both hands. Her shoulders shook.

Something broke inside me.

I started for the door. Azazel caught my wrist. His face harsh, he shook his head.

“Don’t.”

“I need her to see me,” I rasped. “She needs to know.”

“No. You think you’re doing her a favor by revealing the truth, but you’ll end up hurting her more. Most human minds aren’t meant to understand what lies beyond their senses. There’s a reason we don’t run around showing ourselves here on Earth. Taylor was different because she was present during the séance and has known since you were both thirteen. Kids are more open. If you spring this kind of knowledge on an older human, set in their ways, you risk irreparable damage to their psyche.”

My mom’s sob yanked my gaze back to her. I hadn’t seen her cry like this since the early days after my dad’s betrayal. My entire soul hurt watching her.

“She’s already suffering,” I ground out, pulling to get my wrist free of his grip. “I can’t harm her more than this. Let me go.”

“No.” He slung an arm around my waist.

“Azazel, please.”

His grip was implacably firm. I tried making myself visible, but the telltale prickle never came—he kept me invisible, unheard.

“Please,” I begged, my voice as brittle as I felt. “I can’t just—”

My words died at the sight of my aunt walking into the kitchen. Stopping my struggle against Azazel’s hold, I stared numbly. Aunt Cora was my mom’s younger sister, the only other close family we had left. Both my maternal grandparents had died years ago, taken too soon by cancer and heart attack. Working long hours at a law firm on the East Coast, Aunt Cora hadn’t been able to visit us much in the past years. Sometimes we didn’t even see her on Thanksgiving or Christmas, when she

had to work overtime for some clients.

But now she was here, outside of any big holiday...to comfort my mom in her time of grief.

That broken part inside my soul fractured a bit more.

“Hey,” Aunt Cora said, sinking into the chair beside my mom and stroking over her back. “Hey. Shhh. Still nothing?”

My mom shook her head, her eyes reddened. “They’re not even really looking for her. They still think she just ran away. She wouldn’t. She just started a new job, for God’s sake!”

“I know.” Aunt Cora pulled my mom in for a hug. “We’ll keep looking, and digging, okay? I know some people who could help.”

Mom nodded and blew into a tissue.

Aunt Cora’s voice grew quiet. “Have you decided if you want to go?”

My mom’s features hardened. “I don’t know yet. I don’t *know*.”

“Well, you have two more days to make up your mind, and I’ll be here for another week, so even if you want to go after the funeral, I can come with you.”

Funeral? If they were still looking into my disappearance, then it couldn’t be *my* funeral they were talking about. My soul became very, very still, dread stealing through me on icy claws.

“I just...” my mom whispered. “I always thought, the day he died, I’d be... *Happy* is the wrong word. But I’ve been angry with him for so long, and there’s just so much pain, I thought there’d be...closure. But now...” She rubbed a hand over her face.

I felt like I’d been dunked in ice water. No. Oh, no, no, no.

“Yeah,” Aunt Cora said, taking mom’s hand. “It’d be nice if everything were black and white, hm? Feelings aren’t rational. You guys were married for as long as you’ve been apart now, and you loved him once. It’s never that simple turning your back on that.”

No. It couldn’t be.

“I mean,” Aunt Cora went on, “we can always go after the funeral so you don’t have to see them. And then whether you want to cry or spit on his grave—or both—no one will judge you. I’ll be there for you either way.”

My ghost form trembled. My whole spiritual core shook with the chilling implication of their words. “Azazel,” I whispered.

He’d grown very still behind me.

“Has my father died?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know.”

I trembled some more. “How can you not know?”

“I’m not omniscient.” His voice held an edge. “And I didn’t keep tabs on your father. You were estranged.”

“Let’s get something to eat,” Aunt Cora said. “Take your time to think about it. It’s all a bit much right now... First Zoe, then...” She bit her lip. “We’ll figure it out, okay?”

Mom nodded and rose from her chair.

I turned, and Azazel let me go enough so I could face him. “Take me to my father’s.”

His expression was guarded. “Are you sure?”

“I need to know,” I rasped.

He regarded me for a few seconds, but whatever he saw on my face made him give a curt nod. “Does he still live in the same house?”

“Last I heard, yes. The two times he moved, he let me know the new address.” I pressed my lips together, numb though the gesture was. “Not that I ever wrote, or came to visit.”

“Let’s go, then.”

He scooped me up once more, this time the usual way, and I looped my arms around his neck as he took off into the skies, my spiritual form churning with a sickening feeling, like toxic sludge spreading through my system.

My dad’s new family had made their home in Gresham, all the way on the other side of Portland. By car, it would take an hour—or more, during rush hour—via the 26, but Azazel flew the distance in less than thirty minutes.

He touched down in the yard behind a house in the craftsman-style so typical for the region. It wasn’t a big house...but still larger than my mom’s bungalow. Familiar, old resentment stung me. I’d grown up in a house like that, when I thought we were a normal, happy family. Before I found out that the people closest to you can lie to your face for years and years, keeping secrets that are ticking bombs.

Clenching my ghostly fists at the poisonous bite of old anger and hurt, I took the steps to the back porch and walked right through the closed door into the kitchen. I swept my gaze through the room, noted the little signs of family life strewn about the surfaces—a used plate on the table, a school book—math—on the countertop, notes and photos on the fridge.

Pulled by inevitable, self-destructive curiosity despite myself, I stepped up to the refrigerator and took a closer look at the pics pinned there with magnets. Two girls laughed from most of them, at different ages, some photos showing them as toddlers, some newer ones revealing that they were now teenagers.

Their hair was lighter than my dark brown, but their eyes...hazel like mine. Like my father’s.

I’d never seen my half-sisters.

In the initial chaos after the separation and divorce, there was no room for a weird kind of family meeting, and in the years that followed, I was determined to ignore my father’s repeated attempts at contact, and to pretend I had no blood relatives on my dad’s side at all.

Seeing them now, even if only in photos, was like a knife to the heart.

They looked like me, and yet not.

The soft sound of the door opening and closing behind me shook me out of my contemplation of the most painful kind of mirror I’d ever faced. Azazel’s energy brushed my back, his presence like a bulwark of calm in the roughening sea of turmoil threatening to capsize me.

A female voice came from somewhere toward the front of the house. Dread filling my soul, I stepped out of the kitchen and followed the short hallway to the living room. My gaze snagged on the woman sitting on the couch—blond, in her forties maybe, I immediately knew her to be Olivia, my dad’s second wife. Not just from the one photo on the fridge that showed her and the girls, but from how her features were reflected in her daughters’ faces...while those same faces still managed to be eerily similar to my own.

Dressed in black jeans and a black sweater, she held her phone to her ear and took notes on a pad.

“Yes,” she said, her voice soft. “And how much for the larger wreath?” She wrote something down. “Okay. What’s the word limit for that one?” Again, she scribbled a note. “Uh-huh. When do you need the text finalized?” Another note. “Thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

She hung up, laid the phone on the table and rubbed her eyes.

Something loomed over me, ice-cold and dark, like a giant wave in a stormy sea, building, building, building so high that it blocked out the sky.

“Megan,” Olivia called and rose from the couch. “Emma.”

Footsteps thundered on the stairs behind me, and I stepped aside just as a teenage girl walked past

me into the living room.

“Em’s not coming,” she said.

“Did she find something in her closet?”

“No.”

Olivia sighed then raised her voice and said, “If you’re not down in a minute, we’re leaving without you, and I’ll pick a dress for you, and you’ll wear it so help me God.”

“No, I won’t!” came the shouted reply from upstairs.

“Yes, you will!” Olivia yelled back. “I’ll not have you wear jeans and T-shirt to your father’s funeral!”

The wave crested.

I trembled, trembled, a tiny speck in a furious sea of darkness as the ice-cold water crashed down with a roar, cutting off light and sound and warmth, and dragged me under.

CHAPTER 16

WHEN I RESURFACED, I WAS LYING ON THE BED IN MY NEW SUITE. I HAD NO RECOLLECTION OF AZAZEL taking me back to Hell. Of reconnecting my soul with my body. I wasn't really there, mentally.

Staring at the gloomy ceiling, I drifted in and out of sleep. I was dimly aware of something big and furry snuggling up to me with a whine. Of someone talking to me. Azazel? Azmodea? I didn't have the presence of mind to check.

Food came and went. I barely touched it. I should have felt hunger, but there was only this giant, numb hole where any feeling was supposed to be.

Time went by in a sluggish stream. It could have been hours. It could have been days.

I hardly moved, and when I did, it was in a trance. Mostly, I just lay on the bed.

Until a deep voice murmured in my ear, "Enough."

Strong arms slid under me, lifted me up against a hard chest. Warmth and dark power enveloped me, the scent of leather, fire, and spice filling my nose. *Azazel.*

He carried me out of the room, into a space of humid heat and fragrant aroma. My feet touched marble tile when he set me down. I blinked, with little interest, at my surroundings.

Steam rose from the water filling the basin in my bathroom. Only a few candles burned in the holders on the walls, casting the space in intimate, low lighting.

Azazel grasped the seam of my tank top. "Arms up," he said with calm command.

I obeyed, and he pulled the top off me. My bra followed. His fingers went to the button on my jeans, popped it open and pulled down the zipper. Going to one knee in front of me, he shoved my pants and underwear down and helped me step out of them.

The fragrant, steamy air curled around me as I watched him strip his own clothes off with practical efficiency. Scooping me up again, he took the stairs into the basin.

I gasped when the hot water closed around me. The first real sensation in what seemed like a surreal eternity.

He sat down and pulled me into the space between his legs on the bench in the tub, my back to his front. Water trickled over my head as he began washing my hair, ever so gently, the press of his fingers on my scalp and the soft tug on my strands a soothing melody of touch and care.

I didn't realize I was crying until he tilted my face to the side, kissing tears off my cheeks.

"Tell me." His voice was an intimate, coaxing murmur in the cocoon of humid heat around us. He laid his hand over my heart, pressed down a little. "There's too much in here. It's choking you." He rubbed over that aching beat of my heart, then brought his hand up to stroke over my throat. "So tell me."

I inhaled on a shudder. "I didn't think it would hurt this much," I said haltingly, as if I only

realized what I wanted, needed to say in the very moment when the words left my mouth. Which was true. Speaking it out loud gave form to the chaos.

“I thought I was numb,” I said as he continued to wash my hair. “But there’s so much pain.” My breath hitched. What I had taken for lack of feeling was in reality an overload of it, so much so that I couldn’t handle it.

“After my mom confronted him,” I went on, a decade of hurt unraveling before my inner eye, “he just left us. He didn’t fight for us, he simply dropped us like an unwanted burden he was finally rid of. I waited—” My voice broke. “I waited for him to call me, to visit, to ask me to come over. He never did.” I swallowed hard. “Not until years later. And I—” Shaking my head, I caught my breath. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t let him back into my life. It was too late, you know? I *adored* him. Before he left, he was my hero, and I was his princess. And he turned his back on me when it truly counted and abandoned me for *years*. He chose his other family, his other daughters over me.”

Old hurt mingled with fresh anguish, turning my breathing choppy.

Azazel’s hand on my nape, massaging me with sure, unwavering support.

I found more words to untangle my pain. “When he tried to get in touch again years later, I was so bitter, so angry. I shut him out. And it felt good, at first. Like fair turnabout, you know? Show him what it feels like to be ignored. I imagined it hurt him, and it gave me this sense of retribution.” I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. “And of control.”

“You rejected him before he could reject you,” Azazel said, running his fingers through my wet hair, untangling the strands. “Again.”

“Yes.” I sucked in a breath, the humid, aromatic air like a balm to my soul.

That was it, wasn’t it? I cut my father out of my life in a sort of preemptive strike, out of fear of him abandoning me again somewhere down the line. The human mind worked in complex, mysterious ways, and so often we didn’t realize the why behind what we did until much, much later.

When it was too late.

“All these years,” I said, my voice hoarse, “I held on to the memory of my hurt and anger—and fear—as if they were still the reason I kept him out of my life. I never really questioned if I still felt that way. But over time, I think, some of that pain and resentment...lost its edge. And it became more of a habit than real intention. As if...” I struggled for the right words. “Continuing to keep him cut off was easier, I guess, than facing the possibility of rebuilding something with him. The real possibility, that is.” I trembled as I took a deep breath. “Because somewhere, in the back of my mind, I just sort of counted on the vague, far-away, hypothetical possibility of reconciling with him. As in, I could, if I wanted to. Because he was still *there*.”

Azazel’s fingers glided through my hair, petting me, soothing me. “But now he’s not.”

“Now he’s not,” I repeated in a voice as broken as the naive, shattered hope inside me. I closed my eyes, shook my head a little. “Even with me down here and the uncertainty about how I’d be able to visit, I held on to that possibility. And now he’s gone, truly gone, and any chance for reconciliation or just closure is gone too.” My breath hitched, my chest aching. “I’ll never see him again. I can never say—” I clenched my hand to a fist and rubbed it over my breastbone. “I have so many words in here. So much to say. But now I’ll never get to tell him...any of it.”

A sob worked its way up my throat. “And it hurts—so much. I could have—” Another sob. “I could have had years—with him—” Every breath I took burned going in, burned going out. “All this time, lost between us—how much of that was on me?” I sniffed. “He tried. He really tried, you know? He wrote to me, for every birthday, every holiday. He called. He wanted to meet with me, talk to me. But I never gave him the chance. I threw his letters away without reading them. I refused to even hear

him out.” Tears blurred the flames of the candles. “I’ll never know what he would have told me. What he wanted to say.”

More sobs wracked me, rising up from that shredded place in my chest, and I was beyond words. The chaos inside me had spilled out, leaving behind a hollow, damning ache.

Azazel’s arms wrapped around me, pulled me tight against his chest, where the steady beat of his heart was a beacon at my back, anchoring me. He held me while I cried, his cheek pressed against mine.

I couldn’t seem to stop. The tears just kept coming. I don’t know how much time went by, but by rights the water should have long cooled around us, yet it held the same temperature, likely Azazel’s doing.

Even with the heat of the bath, with his arms locked around me, I felt chilled to the bone, and so, so brittle. Scraped raw and cut open. Small and crushable. I shivered, my shoulders hunching forward.

Azazel’s voice at my ear, quiet yet hypnotic. “You asked me about my mother once.”

My breath caught. I stopped trembling, my awareness turning to him.

“She was Lucifer’s favorite daughter,” he went on, his lips on my neck. “Few things make him truly happy. She was one of them. She could do no wrong in his eyes. Even when she fell in love with an angel and began an illicit affair.”

I had grown very still, all my focus on the soft words spoken against my skin.

“Neither Heaven nor Hell like to see their people fraternize, but my parents managed to keep it secret for a while. When Lucifer eventually found out, he turned a blind eye at first, so deep was his love for Naamah.”

“Naamah?”

“My mother.” Old pain echoed in his voice. “When she fell pregnant and bore two children, Lucifer could no longer ignore the relationship. He pressured Naamah to cut ties to Azrael, but she refused.”

“Your father’s name is Azrael?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds an awful lot like yours.”

“Not a coincidence.” His breath tickled my nape. “Naamah loved him so much that she gave both her children names reminiscent of his.”

That seemed a bit obsessive. “What happened next?”

“Since Lucifer couldn’t—or rather, wouldn’t—force his favorite daughter to do anything, much less reject her lover and the father of her children, he went the other way.” A heavy pause. “He informed Heaven of Azrael’s illicit relationship and the fact he had sired progeny with a demon, which caused Azrael to fall.”

“Wait—they kicked him out?”

“Yes. He fell to Earth, and Lucifer claimed him.”

“Claimed?”

“When an angel falls, they don’t automatically become a demon and enter Hell. They plummet to Earth, their wings burned off, and unless a demon claims them for a territory in Hell, the fallen angel remains on Earth as a being neither angel nor demon. They retain some of their powers and can act for either good or evil. They have been called many names in different cultures, but the one that seems to have stuck is jinn.”

Oh, wow. “So, the claiming for Hell...how does that work? Does the jinn have a say?”

“Not really. Some would prefer to live out their now mortal lives as jinn on Earth rather than serve in Hell, and if they’re lucky, they can evade capture. But if the jinn is found, and caught, by a demon with the authority to claim them for their archdemon, the jinn has no choice but to follow the demon to Hell.”

“And become one themselves.”

“That’s how it works. Their wings will regrow once they are in Hell, their essence now bound to this realm.”

“So, Azrael...”

“Became a demon, and lived here with Naamah and the children she had borne him.”

“You and Azmodea.”

“One happy family,” he said, the darkness in his tone belying the literal meaning of the words.

“I take it that didn’t work out.”

The candles flickered in the silence that followed. I waited for him to pick up the story again, knowing he would.

“Naamah was overjoyed to have Azrael down here with her,” he finally continued, his voice quieter than before. His fingers played along my neck. “And for a time, it was well. The few good memories I have of them are from those years.”

I leaned back into his touch, my stomach knotting in anticipation of the momentous *But* that surely would follow.

“As time passed, Azrael became restless. He struggled with his new life in Hell, was never really able to cope with his changed identity. Naamah realized he was unhappy and tried to fill the growing chasm between them. She poured the riches of Hell onto him, twisted herself into knots to please him. But he longed too much for his old life in Heaven, for the grace of God, and in the end, her love wasn’t enough to hold him.” A kiss to my temple. “And he didn’t love her enough to stay.”

Or loved *him* enough... I sucked in a breath, noting the part Azazel left out—that his father cared so little for his own children that he could simply walk away.

My chest ached for him, the sting all the keener because I knew exactly how it felt to be abandoned this way.

I clasped his arm that was wrapped around my middle, my fingers interlacing with his. “What happened then?” I whispered.

“Behind Naamah’s back, Azrael petitioned Gabriel for a return to Heaven.”

“The archangel?”

“The very one. He has the power to grant pardons. From what I heard—” his voice dripped acid “—Azrael crawled before him, begging him to let him come home. It is a rare thing that a demon should be pardoned and welcomed back into Heaven. But for whatever reason, Gabriel relented, though not without conditions attached. For Azrael to be accepted back into the fold, he had to repudiate Naamah, disavow the children he had begotten with her, and reject any claim to his care. And as a reminder of his transgression, he would serve as angel of death for all eternity, ferrying souls to Heaven and marking the ones slated for Hell. Azrael accepted, and he ascended that same day.” A pause charged with so much tension, the flames of the candles crackled. “He left without a word to Naamah, or us.”

I squeezed his fingers, my heart twisting in sympathy. The callousness of that abandonment...

When he spoke again, his tone had dulled. “It wasn’t until days later that Naamah found out where he’d gone. She tried to reach Azrael, to no avail. He would not see her, or even acknowledge her existence. Once she realized he had truly repudiated her...she broke.”

I swallowed hard. The way he said that word, it indicated far more than a crying fit. “What, exactly, happened to her?”

“She became a shadow of herself. Much like a wraith, she only knew two states of being—complete apathy, or mindless rage. When she turned the latter toward Azmodea and me, Daevi took us from her.”

“Wait—she attacked you?”

“I don’t think she was conscious of it. Her wrath was all-encompassing, uncontrollable, random. And in the end, it destroyed her too.”

“What do you mean?” I asked despite dreading the answer.

“She tore herself apart.”

“Figuratively.”

“No.”

I shuddered, the image forming in my mind too vivid, too horrible to dwell on. The memory of the wings pinned in the entrance hall flashed before my inner eye, a brutal reminder of the fact that, yes, demons were entirely capable of ripping off limbs with their bare hands.

“How old were you?” I asked into the weighted silence.

He seemed to ponder that for a moment. “Barely adolescent. Not old enough to have a say in my allegiance.”

“What do you mean?”

Picking up the soap and a washcloth, he started washing me, lathering my shoulders first. “Full-blood demons can choose which side of their bloodline they want to pledge themselves to when they reach maturity. Before then, the parents negotiate the care if they don’t live together. The child has no say in that until they are fully grown.”

Pieces clicked together in my mind. “Lucifer demanded your allegiance after Daevi took you away from Naamah.”

“Just so.”

“And then he...tortured you?” Disbelief dripped from my voice. “Because he was angry at your father? That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Fury rarely does.” He continued washing me limb by limb, his movements efficient yet gentle. “Lucifer had just lost my mother to violence and madness, my father—who caused this—was beyond his sphere of influence, and here I was, the spitting image of the male who broke his favorite daughter, the living reminder of Lucifer’s own failure to protect Naamah. He needed an outlet for his wrath, and I was conveniently handy.”

His tone was so casual, nonchalant even, in such stark contrast to the horrid reality his words painted. My stomach turned.

“But...you’re not just Azrael’s son, you’re Naamah’s as well. If Lucifer loved her so much, shouldn’t that fact have counted for something?”

A dry, humorless laugh. “It’s the only reason he let me live.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to process this kind of dysfunctional family dynamic. “What about Azmodea?” I asked after a minute. “Where was she in all of this?”

“Azmodea is fortunate to look like our mother, enough so that Lucifer could never bring himself to harm her. He let her stay with Daevi, though, because he also couldn’t bear to see her often. The resemblance to Naamah was too much.” The water sloshed as he washed my back. “Once I reached maturity, I petitioned Daevi to join her court. She agreed and claimed me as her kin. I’ve been earning my place ever since and proving my worth to her.”

“Your worth?” I asked, a bite to my voice.

“Power is currency here. Progeny is valued because of the potential strength they bring to a demon’s bloodline and territory. The more high-ranking demons an archdemon’s domain has, the stronger that archdemon’s standing among their peers. The territories often quarrel over land and resources and other petty disputes, and Lucifer mostly lets them, as long as the bloodshed doesn’t get out of hand. The more power an individual demon has, the higher they can climb in rank.” He brought the washcloth to my front, stroking it over my breasts and belly in moves more intended to clean than to arouse. “I made sure to climb high and fast.”

I considered that for a moment. “What’s your rank, exactly?” He’d never mentioned it, and it hadn’t occurred to me to ask.

“Cherub.”

If I had taken a sip from a drink right that second, I’d have spit it out in a burst of laughter. As it was, I choked on the amusement bubbling up from a place of unexpected hilarity, untouched by the earlier anguish.

“A cherub?” I asked in between barely suppressed giggles. Images of the chubby baby angels with tiny wings so often depicted in European art over the centuries filled my mind. I giggled some more.

“Glad to see you’re still capable of merriment,” he muttered, his tone warm.

I squeezed his hand, all too aware of how he’d managed to pull my attention away from the maelstrom of sadness that threatened to drown me before. I wasn’t done processing it, not by a long shot, and what he’d just told me about his own family was sure to hijack my thoughts again later. All the more reason, however, to grasp onto what little humor I could find, wherever I could find it. Laughter had always been my lifeline in times of pain.

“Okay, but seriously,” I said with a grin. “Cherub? You have to admit that’s funny.”

He scoffed. “The term has been around much longer than the human artistic misinterpretation of it. It’s the third-highest order among angels and demons.”

“What’s the highest?”

“Archangels and archdemons. Below them are seraphim, and below them the cherubim.”

Interesting that demons would keep the same terms for their hierarchy in Hell as angels did in Heaven. Perhaps some unconscious form of trying to retain a sense of legitimacy among them.

And thinking of angels...another thing occurred to me. I pursed my lips and slowly said, “So your mother got pregnant with you before Azrael fell...”

He paused in washing my legs, his tone carefully neutral. “That’s correct.”

“Does that mean,” I said, a grin building on my face, “what I think it means?”

“Zoe.” A low growl.

The grin made a full appearance. “It does!”

I gasped, wanted to turn around to see his expression, but his arm around my middle tightened, holding me in place. His energy pulsed over my skin, dark and zinging, but without the bite of real anger. If anything, it felt petulantly annoyed.

I craned my neck to peek at his face. He gave me some major side-eye, but the glint in his eyes spurred me on.

“You,” I breathed, holding his gaze with a shit-eating grin, “are half angel!”

He narrowed his eyes, but the twitch of his lips gave him away. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“Do you have a halo?”

“Stop insulting me.”

“A flaming sword?”

He raised a brow. "Do I need to reacquaint you with my sword? It's not flaming, but then again, if it were, I should probably get medical attention for that."

I giggled and set out to turn around, fully intending to needle him further, when he bit my neck and clasped me tight, keeping me in place. I shrieked at the sudden move, tingles coursing down my body, and when he playfully nipped up and down my neck and shoulder, tickling the sensitive part behind my ear, I completely lost it.

"Stop it, angel!" I cried out with a flare of theatrics, the sincerity of which was sadly undermined by my recurring giggles.

He kept nibbling at my neck, snarling against my skin, and single-mindedly tickling the treacherous spot that made me dissolve into fits of squeaky giggling.

"How very unholy!" I squealed, now laughing outright, and thrashed in his grasp.

His chest shook behind me, his growls underlaid by low chuckles that did fuzzy things to my stomach. Something fluttered in my chest, a strange lightness, filling me with bubbles of warmth. I *liked* his laugh.

And I liked it even more that I brought it out of him.

"I'm not finished washing you," he now purred against my ear.

"Oh?"

The energy in the air shifted as Azazel dipped the washcloth between my legs...and there was simply no way that touch would stay non-arousing. I would have had to be comatose in order not to respond.

"Um," I got out a tad breathless, wiggling under the sudden onslaught of sensation, "actually, you shouldn't use soap—" I gasped "—there."

"Is that so?" The innocent-sounding question contrasted with his targeted moves between my thighs.

"Just water," I wheezed.

"Hm." He dropped the washcloth in favor of using his fingers directly. "I agree." He parted my folds, stroked along rapidly sensitizing skin. "This is better."

Panting, I arched my back, and he held me still with his other arm slung around my waist as he continued to caress me with merciless patience. His large frame caged me as effectively as if I were lying underneath him, his strong thighs on either side of me, the massive wall of power that was his chest at my back.

I let my head fall back onto his shoulder, and he pressed hot kisses against my ear, my neck, my cheek. The water sloshed as I writhed, scissoring my legs helplessly at the desire coiling ever tighter in my core.

"Azazel," I moaned, and brought up my arm, my fingers curling into his hair.

He made a low sound of approval and pulled me even closer. "I could listen to this all day." He slid two fingers inside me, pumped in and out with increasing speed. "My name on your lips as I make you come."

"Yes." I bucked into his touch, riding his hand with shameless abandon. "Please."

"Again," he murmured into my ear.

I obliged, saying his name, over and over, until it turned into a keening cry of pleasure as my climax rolled through me. He wrung every last drop of ecstasy from me, then petted me down with exquisite care.

Catching my breath, I tilted my head and sought his mouth. The kiss was surprisingly tender, a thing of fragile beauty and quiet affection, pulling at something soft and neglected inside me. Our

breaths mingled in the steamy air, and I half-turned in his embrace. My hip brushed over his hard length, and I bit my lip, my hand already halfway toward grasping his cock when he caught my wrist.

"In my bed," he said roughly. "I want you in my bed."

He rose and pulled me up with him. The water splashed as we stepped out, the light of the candles dancing over the raw masculine beauty of his honed body as he grabbed a towel and rubbed me dry with lightning in his eyes. The intensity of his focus made me shiver.

With quick, unassuming efficiency, he toweled himself off too, and the next second he'd hefted me up and was already carrying me out of the bathroom, through my room and into his own. He laid me down on the mattress with unexpected gentleness, given the tension humming in his energy. As if I were something precious, delicate, and his hunger for me in need of tempering lest he break me.

Well, now, I had no intention of tempering anything, least of all him.

When he set a knee on the mattress and started for me, I lifted one leg and stopped him with a tap of my foot against his chest.

He raised a brow in a question.

"Lie down," I said.

Narrowing his eyes, he paused.

"So suspicious," I muttered, curling and flexing my toes against his pecs in the hint of a caress. "One might think you don't want my tongue on you."

His gaze heated, one corner of his mouth tipping up. "No flying necessary?"

"Not this time."

He sprawled on his back, arms crossed behind his head, one leg bent...displaying the full splendor of his package without a touch of modesty. Lips twitching, I crawled over to him.

"Keep your hands to yourself," I warned, "or I'll stop."

His eyes flared. "A challenge?"

"You have a way of...distracting me." I leaned over his chest and placed a kiss on his heartbeat. "But I want to explore you." Another kiss, this one on the hard muscle where his neck met his shoulder. "And you'll let me."

"I'll let you?" His voice was a low rumble.

"Mhm." My mouth on his throat, his pulse jumping against my lips. "Because I think, for once, you'd like to let me do the pleasuring."

"Hm." He watched me with hooded eyes as I straddled him without sitting down.

"And I think," I murmured, leaning down to brush my lips over his, "you're curious and want to see what I'll do when you give me free rein."

If he gave me free rein. The jury was still out on that one, judging by the glint of feral hunger in his gaze. Everything I knew about him said taking and maintaining control in all aspects of his life was as intrinsic to his nature as breathing. To lie there and keep his paws off me while I took my sweet time to lick every inch of him would be akin to torture for him.

I so couldn't wait.

Keenly aware that his restraint might snap at any second, in which case I'd be flat underneath him with him buried deep inside me in the blink of an eye, I kissed his jaw, licked down his throat to the hollow between his collarbones. The muscles in his throat worked as I let my lips glide over his skin, his power a prickling charge pressing against me. A thousand tiny taps of his energy on my body made me gasp with my mouth over his heartbeat.

"I said no touching." I cast him an arch look.

"No, you said to keep my hands to myself." His expression was all feigned innocence as he

wiggled his fingers where his hands rested on the pillow above his head. “This is me with my hands to myself.”

Devious demon.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I kissed his left pec, licked around his nipple—and lightly bit it.

His power washed over me in a wave of electric sparks. The bed rattled.

Insanely pleased at his reaction, I trailed more kisses down his chest, let my lips and tongue explore the dips and ridges of his muscled torso. So close to his skin, his alluring scent filled my nose—bonfire and dark spices, mixed with the lighter fragrance of the bath soap, and aromatic heat that was purely Azazel. *Hmm*. I hummed against his skin, delighting in his taste.

Scooting down, I followed the thin trail of dark hair down over his abdomen, making sure to plant a kiss each on those two muscled lines on his hips that formed an arrow to his groin. My loose hair might have brushed over his hard cock straining for attention.

Fire crackled in the air. When I looked up, the expression on his face was so carnal, it made my stomach flutter and my inner muscles clench.

Desire was a liquid lure as I finally directed my focus to the enormous erection jutting up from among close-cropped hair. As with the first time I’d seen his cock that day he’d stripped in front of me before taking a shower, the raw, erotic sight of it made lust pool in my core. I licked my lips, pressed my thighs together, anticipation a thrill in my blood.

Reaching out, I let my fingers lightly dance over the silken skin stretched taut over steel. His dick jumped at my touch, and I grasped it, unable to wrap my fingers fully around its girth. My hair fell around my head like a dark curtain as I leaned forward and licked along the line from the base to the top, the tip of my tongue lapping up the bead of precum that had appeared.

Power pulsed in the room.

The muscles in his thighs tightened, and his hips jerked ever so slightly, as if he’d barely kept himself from thrusting into my mouth. I sent him a knowing glance, a small smile on my lips as I flicked my tongue around the broad head and teased the sensitive front.

A whisper of hot energy along my inner thighs, like molten honey poured onto my skin, moving up toward my intimate flesh. I jolted, stopped, and glared at him.

“I am not technically touching you,” he murmured, a sly smirk curving his mouth. He waved his hand. “Do go on.”

Shooting him another glower, I leaned down again, took him into my mouth in one quick move and *sucked*.

Flames rolled out from his body and danced over the sheets.

I reared back, heart thudding, but he’d already extinguished the fire.

Eyes sparking with lightning, he gave me an unrepentant grin and crooked his finger. “Proceed.”

“You are so cocky,” I muttered.

“Fully justified.” He gestured at the length of his undeniably swoon-worthy body.

I rolled my eyes, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning. Bending down again, I closed my mouth over his dick and swirled my tongue around the head while I sucked.

A sound that was half groan, half growl escaped him, his hips bucking up. The phantom touch of his energy returned to my inner thighs, licks of heat coming ever closer to my folds. I gasped against his shaft as his power pushed and pulled on the lust-swollen flesh between my legs, an energetic imitation of the sensual havoc his mouth could wreak on me.

“Azazel,” I ground out, my voice somewhere between snarling and moaning.

The look on his face was distinctly feline in its smugness. “Hearing you moan my name while you

have my cock in your mouth,” he purred. “The ultimate delight.”

“You’re insuffera—” The sentence ended in a helpless cry of pleasure as his energy locked onto my clit and pulsed in a rapid-fire rhythm. Not unlike... I sucked in a breath. “Did you study my vibrator’s settings?”

He wagged his brows once, his smile dripping with masculine arrogance. “You still have some exploring to do.” His cock twitched against my jaw to underscore his point.

Oh, you cheeky—

I narrowed my eyes and proceeded to dole out some sensual torture of my own. Or tried to. It was increasingly difficult to focus on sucking him to within an inch of madness when his unrelenting energy play between my thighs drove my own arousal to the point I was ready to hump his leg right then and there.

Gasping, I released his cock with a wet plop and closed my eyes for a second. “Fuck this,” I growled, crawled up his body, grasped his length and slid down on it.

His throaty laughter almost drowned out my moan. Pleasure sparked all along my nerve endings, rushed through my blood and burst in my mind as his girth stretched me just on the right side of painful. Filled. I was so deliciously filled. Savoring the incredible sensation, I threw my head back and closed my eyes.

“Still want me to keep my hands to myself?” His voice was an erotic thrum, his power licking over my skin.

“Hell no.”

A pleased growl. “Good answer.”

His hands were on my breasts the next second, and I arched into his touch. Squeezing and massaging, he lavished his attention on my curves as I started riding him, sliding up and down his cock. I tilted my hips on the downward glide to hit the spot just so. My fingers curled into his chest. Pleasure built in my core, my breathing turning ragged.

His mouth on my breast, teeth closing on my nipple. Electric heat licked right over my clit. I grabbed his neck, desperate for purchase in the storm that hovered, ready to sweep me away. His energy wrapped around me, suffused me, until I wasn’t sure where I ended and he began.

This. I’d needed this. To lose myself in him. Feel my desire mirrored in his own, consume him as he consumed me.

“Azazel,” I whispered hoarsely, my hands in his hair, my mouth seeking his.

“Here,” he murmured against my lips. “I’m right here.”

He met my kiss with fissures in his composure, letting me see, feel, taste the naked, raw, unbridled need within him. For me.

Me.

My breath shuddered, something hard inside me cracking open.

His fingers tangled in my hair, pulled my head back to expose my throat, and then his teeth were on my neck, the sharp prick of his fangs teasing the skin over my racing pulse as he bucked to meet my hips in a rhythm of primal urgency.

He uttered a word, half feral and choked with the kind of need that shook me to my core, and it took me a moment to understand what he’d rasped. “Zoe.”

I shattered. A crescendo of bliss and deep, open vulnerability wrapped in pleasure, and when he followed me right over the edge, his wings erupted from his back with a deafening whoosh, the flame-licked onyx enveloping us both.



WHEN I WOKE UP WHAT FELT LIKE HOURS LATER, I BLINKED AGAINST THE SEMI-DARKNESS, EXPECTING to see the faint outline of my own room. Much like the first night I'd spent with Azazel, I fell asleep right in his arms, and I fully expected he'd later deposited me back in my own bed, as he'd done before.

Not this time.

His scent wrapping around me like a sensual blanket, Azazel lay behind me, my back to his chest, his skin against mine the sweetest brand. The silken sheet covering me and him was so incongruously warm and heavy, like a weighted, heated blanket. I sighed, snuggled further into him, and pulled the sheet more snugly around me—and stilled.

“Try not to dislocate my wing,” came Azazel’s sleepy murmur.

My eyes shot wide. Flexing my fingers against the silky brush of *feathers*, I uttered a muffled squeak and yanked my hand back. “Sorry!”

He harrumphed and shook out his wing, then settled it over me again. “You’re wiggly.”

“I can always go sleep in my own bed.”

With a sound I liked to interpret as a contemplative growl, he snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me closer. Splaying his hand possessively over one of my breasts, he squeezed. “No.”

I pressed my thighs together against the tingle of arousal and smiled into the darkness.

CHAPTER 17

“SO TODAY WENT BETTER,” AZMODEA SAID, HER VOICE MUFFLED.

I turned my head to look over to where she lay face-down on the table, her auburn hair spilling out over the towel as the female demon massaged her exposed back.

I scoffed. “Because I only died twenty times instead of thirty?”

“It’s an improvement.”

Yeah, right.

The second female demon was currently kneading my calves, and I flinched with each deep tissue stroke. Practice today had left my muscles particularly sore.

I still didn’t know how Azazel managed to convince me to start combat training. I dimly remembered it might have something to do with a promise made under sensual torture involving wicked fingers and a skillful tongue.

A promise I regretted every day since.

There was a reason I’d never joined any competitive sports. I hated any form of ball games, mostly because my face seemed to attract said balls like an industrial strength magnet yanked metal close. I didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count the times I came home from school with a tissue stuck in my nose because a dodgeball/volleyball/soccer or insert-any-sport-with-a-head-sized-ball had hit me square in the face and made me snort blood.

I didn’t fare any better in gymnastics, track and field, or any of the other athletic activities. It was like my DNA was deeply suspicious of all forms of organized sports. Perplexingly, that reasonable explanation did not win over any of my PE teachers.

The only exercise I’d ever been halfway decent at was yoga, thanks to which I was nicely flexible. Pity that fact didn’t help me all that much when it came to fighting. I still landed flat on my ass more times than not, even when I was sparring with someone who pulled all their punches, like Caleb.

It was either him in the training ring with me, or Hekesha, and, occasionally, Azmodea, like today. Never Azazel. He only watched from the sidelines of the sparring hall, witnessing my repeated failures with barely banked heat in his eyes.

When I asked him why he didn’t train me himself, he shot me a dark look and said silkily, “Lack of motivation.”

“What?”

He crossed his arms. “Any time I’d best you, one way or another, we’d end up on the ground with me between your legs. You’d have no incentive to really fight me.”

He did have a point. So training with anyone else it was.

I'd been at this for two weeks, and only today did I manage to theoretically die a few times less than usual. I had no clue why Azazel thought it would make any sense to train me in combat, given the fact that I was and always would be a hundred times weaker than a half-blood. With no powers of my own, I wouldn't last a minute. And if I had to go up against a full-blood demon, I'd be toast in a matter of seconds, combat training or no.

Still, I kept at it. A promise was a promise.

"So," Azmodea said, flipping on her side to face me, "how have you been holding up?"

"With what?" Though I could guess what she was aiming at.

"Your father." Her silver eyes held the glint of knowledge and old pain.

We'd touched the subject here and there in the days following my visit to Earth, though I didn't tell her as much as I did Azazel. Still, it was nice to have someone else to talk to about this—someone who could also sympathize with a complicated paternal relationship.

My chest constricted, and I took a deep breath that would have hurt my bruised ribs if Azmodea hadn't healed them right after practice. "I'm okay, I guess. I mean, okay-ish. It still hurts, but I have a feeling it always will. I don't think about it all the time, but there are moments when it hits me. That he's really gone. That I'll never get a chance to talk to him about everything."

"Grief comes in waves," Azmodea said gently.

"Yeah. In those moments...I wish I were still living on Earth and sort of religious. Because then I'd believe I'd at least see him in Heaven at some point, you know? I now know that place is real, sure, but with me being down here, I also know I'll never enter Heaven. So, even that little hope is a moot point."

Azmodea was silent. Uncharacteristically silent. It was the kind of heavy pause in a conversation after someone said something truly shocking, unbelievably dumb, or so obviously wrong that the other party didn't even know how to unpack that.

I lifted my head and stared at her. "What?" Oh, God, what kind of verbal blunder did I commit now?

Her eyes shimmering silver, she opened her mouth, closed it again, her expression somewhere between pity and pain. She nodded at the demon masseuses, and they left the room.

"*What?*"

"Zoe," she began in the tone of voice used to deliver news of a loved one's death, "your father is not in Heaven."

I blinked at her. A chill grabbed my stomach and twisted. "What do you mean?" I whispered.

"He's either a ghost on Earth—which is unlikely, because then you'd have seen him hang around his house when you were there—or, more likely, he's...down here."

"As a sinner?" I choked out.

She gave a tight nod.

The chill spread through my body. "Why?" I sat up, clutching the towel to my chest. "Because he's an adulterer?" My opinion on his wrongdoing notwithstanding, *that* was ridiculous, draconian, incredibly Old Testament—

"Well, yes," Azmodea cut into my thoughts.

My whole body tingled, and not in a good way. I couldn't feel my legs. "That's—that's absurd!"

She shrugged. "It's the law."

"Well, it's a shitty law!"

She sighed. "We don't make the rules, Zoe. We just enforce them."

No. Oh, no, no, no.

My mind was racing, thoughts tumbling one over the other.

“I thought Az told you...”

Her soft words yanked me out of the spiral of chaos in my head—and heart. I sucked in a breath, my stomach plummeting. “He knows?”

Azmodea sat up as well. “Zoe...”

My mouth tasted sour. I hopped off the table, got dressed in record time, and stormed out of the room, ignoring Azmodea’s calls.

Vengeance jumped up from her lounging position outside the massage room and trotted behind me as I marched through the hallways, nausea churning in my gut. The huge double doors to the training hall loomed in front of me. I pushed them open without breaking my stride.

The scent of sand and dirt and sweat hit me, mixed with the metallic tang of blood and weapons. In the center of the arena-like room, two shapes moved in a blur of strikes and parries. Blades clanged, swished and sang. Dust flew up and billowed around them. The two fighters moved too fast for me to actually see them, but I didn’t need my eyes to recognize Azazel. His power hovered in the air, a thick charge of honed violence and controlled, efficient brutality.

“Is it true?” I called out. My voice wavered, barely audible over the sound of the sparring.

And yet, Azazel stopped the fight immediately. He took one look at me, his features hardening, and jerked his head at his sparring partner. “Out.”

The other demon left so fast, one would think a hellhound snapped at his heels.

Azazel faced me, his bare chest heaving slightly. Sweat glistened on his bronze skin, his muscles flexing, the heat of battle licking over his formidable body. Any other time I’d have appreciated the sight of him all worked up and brimming with primal, masculine ferocity. Right now, though, I stared at him with nausea twisting my stomach, my hands clenched to fists at my sides.

“Is he here?” I rasped. “My father. Is he in Hell?”

The expression on his face was answer enough.

My breath hitched. “You knew. You knew, and you didn’t tell me.”

He moved closer, the sword loosely held in his hand, pointing down. A muscle feathered in his jaw. “And what good would it have done if I told you?”

“I would have—”

“What?” His tone sharpened. “You were grieving. And you’d like me to add to that pain?”

“It’s not about that,” I ground out, my heart thudding so fiercely I feared it might break out of my chest. “We could save him. Find his soul, and—I don’t know, get him out. You guys trade in souls all the time. So trade for him! If he’s yours, then you get to decide how—or if—he is tortured. You could just leave him be, couldn’t you? Or take him to Earth!”

The tiny muscles around his eyes twitched, his jaw hardening, as if he was trying his damndest to remain calm against a surge of emotion. “Have you considered that his punishment is just? That there’s a reason he should be here? It’s not something *we* decide. We don’t drag innocent souls to Hell. They are already marked.”

“Then unmark him!” I was breathing heavily now, the thought of my dad’s soul suffering from who knew what kind of torture burning through me like nauseous acid. “Yes, what he did was shitty. He lied to us, he betrayed us, he hurt us, but—he shouldn’t burn in Hell for it. That’s for murderers and rapists, for fuck’s sake. *He shouldn’t be here.*” My eyes prickled hot, and I blinked furiously against the impending threat of tears.

“There’s nothing I can do for him,” Azazel said, a horrible finality in his voice.

“Please.” My throat clogged up. “Please, you have to find him. I can’t just leave him here. If you

could just find out where—”

“I already know.” His rough interruption cut me off. “I know exactly where he is.”

Startled, I closed my mouth and stared at him. A storm of epic proportions hid behind his eyes, glimpses of violently leashed, frustrated rage showing in the fiery cracks in his skin.

“Lucifer has him,” he said through gritted teeth.

The floor fell out from under me. My vision went a little sideways.

“There’s an archive,” he went on, “where all souls are logged. Their names, their origins, who caught them, and where they are kept now. I made an inquiry after we returned. A demon from Lucifer’s territory captured your father’s soul, brought it down here, and then traded it up. It has been added to the cattle in Lucifer’s personal demesne.”

Cattle. I choked on my breath, and bile rose up my throat. I covered my mouth with my hand.

“There’s no trading for him, Zoe. There’s no buying him out. Not with Lucifer. Not with our history. As soon as I ask him for this one particular soul, it’ll paint a target on your father’s back. Lucifer will keep him just to spite me. And do not ever underestimate how astute he is—by now I’m sure he’ll know about you as my ‘pet,’ and if I ask him for your father’s soul, he’ll put two and two together and will probably pour acid on him in front of me just to see if I flinch.”

I staggered back, the image of my father screaming in agony as his spiritual skin corroded under acid far too vivid in my mind.

“If his soul were in another demon’s territory,” Azazel continued, his voice low and rough, “I’d have options. Depending on the demon’s rank, I could either sneak in and steal it, or march in there and take it by brute force. I can’t do that with Lucifer. His demesne is the best guarded among all the domains in Hell. Anything I could try would be akin to suicide. There’s no scenario where I would come out of this on top.” His hand flexed around the sword hilt. “That’s why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want to give you false hope before I knew where his soul was, and after I found out—telling you would only hurt you.”

With my hand still covering my mouth, I met his gaze, my entire body trembling.

My father was here, in the same realm as me, and yet he might as well have been in a different dimension. I couldn’t help him. He would suffer, day in and day out, for who knew how long, while I stood by, powerless to do anything.

The irony. The goddamn irony of it all. My estranged father, who’d ruined our family, ended up in Hell, and instead of it making me rejoice for poetic justice, it broke my heart. And here I was in Hell, married to a demon, but instead of it giving me any sort of power to change my father’s fate, all it gave me was a lesson in helpless anguish.

A sound of despair escaped my tightened throat.

Despite all the hurt he’d caused me and my mom, despite years of pain and resentment and broken childhood dreams, the thought of him being tortured shattered something inside me, a small, soft part that had stubbornly resisted calcification under bitter cynicism.

How could I *live* here knowing he was being ripped apart? There was no way I could ever relax, smile or laugh, with the certainty of his suffering hanging over me like a toxic storm cloud.

I couldn’t shake the image of my father’s soul being tortured, over and over, with acid and hellhounds and fire and a thousand ways I couldn’t even fathom. The cries and wails of the damned souls echoed in my mind, the piercing agony in their voices making me taste bile.

Nausea bubbled in my stomach, boiled up, up, up until I gagged. Convulsing under a violent tremor, I sank to my knees and vomited.

I barely noticed Azazel kneeling beside me, holding my hair back. My guts twisted, bucked, and I

puked, over and over, until my throat burned, my stomach ached as if grated to shreds, and nothing came up anymore. Still, I dry-heaved, shivering uncontrollably. Tears ran down my face, and I gasped for air.

Azazel's arms closed around me, pulled me to him. White-hot anger sparked in my veins. I jerked and tried to get out of his hold. He didn't let me go. With the kind of unshakable patience that drove my irrational fury only higher, he held me tight as I fought him like a wildcat.

I bucked and writhed, pummeled his chest, angry, so fucking angry, at him, at this fucked-up situation, at this fucking twist of fate that put me in the care of the one demon in Hell who was so high on Lucifer's shit list that he couldn't even ask for a single soul. Fury seared me from the inside out, and I screamed, striking out in a mindless rage. My knuckles hurt from the blows, but I kept punching his chest and shoulders...until a whisper of a memory stalled me.

He needed an outlet for his wrath, and I was conveniently handy.

Gasping, I pulled my shaking hands back, curled them against my chest.

Oh, God.

The conversation about Azazel's past came back in a flash, and a full-body tremble took hold of me. Lucifer had turned his fury on Azazel because the real target hadn't been available, and so he punished Azazel by proxy.

And I...I just did the same. It wasn't Azazel I was angry with. Not really. He didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't his fucking fault he had a sadistic psychopath for a grandfather, and this entire goddamn situation wasn't his fault either. I was mad at Lucifer for his petty family feud that made it impossible to help my father, but because Lucifer wasn't here...I lashed out at Azazel.

Just like Lucifer.

Something twisted painfully in my chest. My breath was little more than a wheezing shudder, and fresh tears sprang to my eyes, burning like the shame now creeping up my throat.

"I'm sorry," I rasped, laying a shaking hand on his chest, my fingers trembling against skin I'd been hitting just seconds before. "I'm so sorry." A sob punched its way out of me, and my voice broke. "I didn't mean to—I'm sorry." I kept on apologizing, crying, stroking his chest, in a helpless attempt at soothing the hurt I'd caused him.

He pulled me closer, his energy a raw, biting charge in the air. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, at odds with the intended lightness of his words. "You barely tickled me."

I couldn't even smile at that, the heaviness in my chest snuffing out all amusement. Shaking my head, I stroked him some more with trembling hands, my breath hitching.

His hot breath fanned the top of my head as he kissed my hair. "You're nothing like him," he said in a harsh whisper.

I sagged against him, deflated, weary with the overload of feeling too much and nothing at all.

Azazel held me while I wept in silence. It wasn't until much, much later, when he carried me out of the training ring, that I noticed the pattern of sand-turned-glass on the floor all around where he'd sat cradling me.

The kind only a fire of immense heat would cause.



IN THE WEEK THAT FOLLOWED, I MOVED THROUGH THE DAYS LIKE A GHOST. IT WAS LIKE A FOG descended over me, a perpetual veil of numbness that separated me from life. Numbness that I clung

to with both hands—because I knew with instinctual clarity that if I let one emotion in, all the others would come rushing in as well, the devastation about the situation with my father most prominent among them. And once I felt that again...I wouldn't function at all.

So I went through the motions, there but not, knowing I couldn't go on like this but unable to flip whatever switch needed flipping in my head to change it. Azazel tried to engage me as much as possible, and I tried to go along... Perceptive as he was, however, he knew my heart wasn't in it, and when even his usually surefire sensual persuasiveness failed to draw me in, he stopped trying.

I fully anticipated him to back off completely, given my lack of enthusiasm for basically anything, but to my surprise—numbed by the fog that stubbornly lingered—he still came to me at night. In sleep, the veil I so clung to during the day would become fragile, tearing to reveal the horrors I repressed, and I'd wake from a nightmare of fire and pain and being a helpless witness to my father's torture—and Azazel would be there, a solid, soothing presence next to me, petting me down from my panic.

During the day, he made himself increasingly scarce. His withdrawal would have seriously hurt me, if my own apathy weren't the damn reason for it in the first place, and if my numbness had allowed for any emotion more acute than a slight sting. As it was, the fog shielded me from the roaring pain I knew loomed on the other side of this widening chasm, and all I could do was watch the distance grow.

Until that day Hekesha came knocking on my door, frantic in a way I'd never seen her.

"You need to come," she pressed out, her face ashen.

"Where?"

"Just...come." She swallowed and added, "Please."

Something like worry pierced the fog. It was a rare moment when Hekesha would voluntarily offer such niceties. Usually she'd just glare or grunt.

"Okay," I slowly said, following her out into the hallway. "What's going on?"

She didn't answer—a glimpse of her usual Hekesha-ness—just kept walking ahead at a brisk pace until she got to a door. Gingerly, she opened it.

I sucked in a breath. What greeted me was a level of destruction that shook me even in my numbed state. Splintered pieces of what once was furniture littered the room, half charred, some of it still smoldering, the rugs on the floor partially burned, liberally showered in glistening shards of glass. Ash swirled in the air, along with what looked like sooty scraps of paper floating on a phantom wind, and behind it all, on the wall, the seared remains of shelves.

I knew this room. I'd been here before, when I explored the mansion. It was some sort of study, with scrolls tucked into antique bookcases, a massive desk, and comfortable chairs to lounge on next to an armoire filled with liquor and drinking glasses.

All of that old-world, sophisticated coziness was smashed to smithereens, as if a fiery tornado had ravaged the room.

And in the middle of the destruction, on the one untouched chair, sat Azazel. His head bent, his elbows on his knees, hands clasped together, he was as still as a statue. Behind his back, his wings rose, the unforgiving black of the feathers seeming to swallow the light spilling in from the hallway.

"He's been like this for hours," Hekesha whispered from behind me. "We don't know what to do. It's weirding us out." She gave me a small shove forward. "Fix him."

"What?" I whispered back, rooted to the spot. I had no idea how to handle this. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Just do what you've been doing that made him happy before," she said under her breath. "You were good at that. Go do that some more."

And before I could protest—or marvel at the unexpected compliment she'd just given me—she shoved me into the room and closed the door behind me.

With the light of the hallway cut off, the room fell into almost complete darkness. Only the last embers of a not quite extinguished fire on a rug in the corner illuminated the gloom. No flames danced over Azazel's wings. They were pitch-black, hiding him in the near darkness of the room.

It took my eyes a minute to adjust to the low lighting, and I squinted at the shape I knew to be him in the center of the room.

"Azazel?" I asked tentatively, my heart thumping in my chest like a trapped animal.

I wasn't scared of him. Not really.

Thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.

Okay, maybe a little.

I inched forward, my shoes crunching glass, until I stood close enough to him that I could reach out and touch his head. With a slight tremble to my hand, I did just that. As soon as my fingers brushed his hair, iridescent flames ignited all over his wings. The darkness receded a little.

"Azazel?" I ventured again. My pulse was a roar in my head. "What happened?"

I cautiously let my hand glide down to his face, and he turned ever so slightly into my touch. His sigh echoed loudly in the deafening silence of the room.

"There is a festival," he said, his tone inscrutable. "It commemorates the Fall from Heaven. Every year, high-ranking demons come to join the festivities at Lucifer's court. All members of his own family have a standing invitation...including me. I haven't gone in over two thousand years." The flames on his wings flared brighter, and an edge crept into his voice. "It's not the kind of company I enjoy."

Of course not. I swallowed hard. If this shindig was held at Lucifer's court, it would be like walking back into his own personal nightmare, what with demons being so long-lived that many of the ones who were there when he was a boy and witnessed his abuse would still be present today. My thumb stroked over his temple, a helpless caress.

"An RSVP is required to attend," he continued, "even with a standing invitation. This year, I responded with yes."

I stilled. My heart skipped a beat.

"The festival takes place in Lucifer's palace." A tense pause. "In the bowels of which your father's soul is being kept."

I had trouble breathing.

"Attending the festival is the only way to enter the palace without drawing undue attention. The festivities are notoriously chaotic, and it would be easy to slip away from the crowds." His wings flared. "And to search and find a soul in the pits."

My hand trembled against his cheek.

"I thought it was a good plan," he said, darkness weaving between his voice, "if a bit dangerous." He shrugged. "But doable. Get in, slip away, grab the soul, get out."

Dizziness threatened to creep in from the sides, the ominous shadow of what he wasn't yet saying encroaching on my mind.

"And then I received this."

A note appeared in his hand. He held it out to me.

I took it with trembling fingers. Unfolding it, I squinted at the script I could barely make out in the dark. "A little light," I whispered.

The tapestry behind me went up in fresh flames, casting an orange glow over the paper.

My dearest grandson,

I am delighted you have chosen to grace us with your presence at this year's commemoration of the Fall from Heaven. I am looking forward to seeing you again. — L

PS: Please make sure to bring along your new pet. I cannot wait to make her acquaintance.

Dread spread inside me on icy claws, chilling me down to my soul. My breathing flattened, as if someone had dropped a boulder on my chest.

"I had every intention," he ground out, "to leave you out of this. The very last place I want to take you is that hellforsaken palace. He hasn't shown an interest in me in over a millennium, and I thought—" He clenched his jaw so hard, the planes of his face seemed to rearrange themselves. "I didn't think my RSVP would draw any attention. There will be close to a thousand demons in attendance—I should have been conveniently anonymous." His voice dropped to a growl. "But he noticed. He noticed, and with him personally requesting your presence, I have no other choice. I can't back out, and I can't leave you here." He lifted his head and met my gaze for the first time since I entered the room. The flicker of violent lightning in his eyes revealed a glimpse at the unmitigated rage he'd let loose on the room earlier. "You're going to accompany me to the Fall Festival, and you're going to meet Lucifer."

The room spun. Or maybe that was my head. I grabbed his shoulder for purchase, dizziness a buzz in my veins.

"I have no idea," he continued in a low voice, "what he intends to do, but whatever it is, we'll get through it, and then we'll grab your father's soul and get out of there."

My eyes widened. "You're still planning to go through with it?"

His energy was an electric hum in the air, his tone lethally soft. "If I am to enter that palace to face that wretched fucker again—and drag you there with me—I will damn well not waste the opportunity to steal a soul right from under his nose."

I sucked in air, light-headed. "Okay," I wheezed.

He leveled a stare at me that raised the hairs on my arms with its intensity. "You are not to leave my side. Ever. When I slip away to get your father's soul, you're coming with me, because I sure as fuck will not let you out of my sight for even one minute. Not at his court."

All I could do was nod. I didn't really trust myself to speak.

"The festival takes place in two weeks," Azazel continued. "You will need to step up your combat training routine."

Like that would make a difference should I face a demon attacker. I'd be mincemeat in under a minute.

His gaze was calculating as he studied me. "No one will expect you to be trained even a little, so whatever defensive skill you can show may buy you a few crucial seconds. Like I said, you will not leave my side, and a moment's delay on the part of an attacker could help me defend you." The hint of a wry smile touched his mouth. "And you'll need to strengthen your mental shields again."

Dammit.

The enormity of the situation hit me then. The sheer danger and impossibility of it. We were going to infiltrate Lucifer's palace to get my father's soul out. While I was numb with grief, Azazel had been planning this, plotting to go back into his own personal nightmare...for me. So I'd be happy again.

With my hand still on his cheek, I went down on my knees in front of him so our faces were level. I kissed him gently, my breath trembling, all my layers unraveled and raw before him. Holding his stormy gaze, I swallowed hard, found my voice and whispered, "Thank you."



A WEEK AFTER THE ILL-FATED NOTE FROM LUCIFER ARRIVED, AZMODEA BLAZED INTO THE TRAINING ring where Azazel and I were currently sparring. My demon husband finally deigned to take over my combat training, to better correct my style, as he said. The fact I now had to go up against an unfairly hot demon whose naked chest slicked by sweat seemed to evaporate my brain cells only compounded my already weak “style.”

Which was why, when Azmodea blasted through the doors of the training hall, I was currently with my back on the ground, Azazel straddling me with a look somewhere between resignation and easily kindled lust.

“*Why*,” Azmodea called out, “by the nine circles of Hell, would you go back into that snake pit of a palace? And more importantly, why would you go *without me*?”

The look of resignation on Azazel’s face deepened, and with a sigh, he turned his head to his sister. “I take it Daevi told you?”

Hands on hips, Azmodea glared. “You know she did. She just didn’t know *why*.”

Taking a deep breath, Azazel came to his feet with a grace that should have been at odds with his size, yet seemed to make perfect sense, like the elegant fluidity of a panther. He offered me a hand and hauled me up in a show of easy strength when I accepted.

“Here,” he said and handed me a bottle of water he’d summoned, then turned to Azmodea with a calculating expression. “We’re going to steal a soul from Lucifer.”

Azmodea summoned an entire settee, plopped down on it with a flourish, put her chin in her hand and batted her lashes. “Do tell.”

And he did. While he laid out the situation and our plan, I limped over to the settee and gingerly sank down on it, chugging my water and contemplating the weird turns my life had taken to lead me to the point I was plotting a soul heist with two demons in Hell.

“You will need a distraction,” Azmodea eventually said after Azazel finished.

He cast her a look. “Obviously.”

“Once Lucifer gets his claws in you in front of the court, he won’t let you go without an intervention.”

Azazel said nothing, but a muscle feathered in his jaw.

“Don’t worry.” Azmodea leaned back with a smirk. “I have *just* the thing.”

“Not the bats.”

She waved that away. “*Much* better, darling.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Ah-ah. I won’t ruin the surprise. Trust me, it’ll cause the most delicious chaos.”

He raised a brow at that.

Turning to me as if only now remembering I was sitting right next to her, Azmodea asked, “Has he brought you up to speed on the court?”

“Uh...”

She shot Azazel an arch look. “Come on. She needs to know the basics of the who-is-who so she won’t accidentally insult anyone.” Facing me again, she patted my knee. “I’ll draw you a family tree and a diagram of the alliances. But the most important thing to remember is that besides Lucifer, the person with the most power at court is Lilith.”

I paused with the bottle raised to my lips. “Wait. *The* Lilith? As in the apocryphal first wife of

Adam?”

“Very good,” Azmodea purred.

It was among the large collection of random facts I’d picked up over the years. The way my brain worked, I’d forget what I wanted to buy without making a list, but I could reference jump through ten articles on Wikipedia and remember weird details like this one subspecies of Canadian wolves who lived entirely off fish.

So, likewise, I had at some point learned that according to some non-canonical biblical texts, Adam had another wife before Eve, but she refused to obey him like a good little subjugated wifey, so she was cast out of Eden. Not a big stretch to see how her legend was a goldmine for feminist religious theory.

If you saw past the part where she was later demonized—literally—and became known as a baby-eating monster.

And now, apparently, I was going to meet the real-life version of her. Yay?

“Is she...a demon too? Some of the texts say she is.”

Azmodea shook her head. “No, sweetie. Humans don’t just become demons. Although she definitely is more than human now. Thousands of years down here *have* changed her...” She stared off with a pondering expression.

“She’s bonded to Lucifer,” Azazel said, his eyes on me. “Not unlike we are.”

My eyebrows shot up. “They’re married?”

“No,” Azmodea cut in. “Marriage was invented after their union.” She sucked her teeth, a small smile playing about her mouth. “She’s the reason Lucifer fell.”

My eyebrows shot up. “I’ll need to hear that story.”

“Ah,” Azmodea sighed, tilting her head and looking at the ceiling. “The great romance of the ages.”

Azazel made a very un-Azazel-like snort.

“What?” Azmodea pinned him with a look. “He might be a bag of shit in the family department, but his devotion to her *is* epic.” To me, she said, “Lilith was the first woman, God’s first daughter, and quite beloved at that. God paired her with Adam, and they were to create human life on Earth. Bummer was, Adam was a bore. Lilith couldn’t stand him. She refused to lie with him—that’s biblical for fucking—”

I spit out my drink.

“—which enraged God, as you can imagine,” Azmodea continued blithely. “No human life without ye olde horizontal tango, ya know?”

“Doesn’t need to be horizontal,” Azazel muttered.

I choked on the rest of the water that was stuck in my throat, tears in my eyes. They really needed to stop before I suffocated from laughing too much.

Azmodea patted my back. “There, there, dear. Anyway, Lucifer meanwhile had fallen in love with Lilith. He was still an angel at the time, the brightest star of Heaven. He’d been watching Lilith in Eden, and when she rejected Adam, he swooped in and made his move. Stole her from right under Adam’s nose, you could say. Well, it’s important to note that she *wanted* to be stolen.” She wagged her brows. “God found out, of course, and things went downhill from there. Lucifer was kicked out of Heaven and cast down into Hell, Lilith got thrown out of Eden and cursed to roam the barren wilderness alone, and Adam got a new woman, this time with a bit less of an ‘attitude problem.’” She made air quotes.

“But she still disobeyed the order not to eat from that tree, though, right? Is that true?”

“Yep. That was Lucifer’s revenge. He clawed his way out of Hell for that one, snuck into Eden and seduced both Adam and Eve to eat from the tree.”

“Both?”

“Sure did. Not that the old men writing these stories down left that little tidbit in there.” She winked at me. “But that wasn’t the end of it. While on the earthly plane, Lucifer sought out Lilith and offered to take her with him, to rule Hell as his equal. She accepted, and he brought her down here. God didn’t like that either, so he took Lilith back.”

I pursed my lips. “I take it that didn’t go over well?”

Azmodea gave a small huff. “Caused the war between Heaven and Hell. See, Lucifer had managed to rally support among his former brethren in Heaven, and there was a good-sized contingent of rebel angels who opposed Lucifer’s punishment. He gathered them around him and attacked Heaven. It was an epic battle, and contrary to what is generally known, God didn’t win. Would he have won eventually? Maybe.” She shrugged. “We’ll never know, because he offered a deal. Lucifer would get Lilith back if he agreed to stay in Hell for all eternity, never to set foot on Earth again, and if he took up the task of punishing the sinners for God. Lucifer agreed, and the truce has held ever since.”

“All that is to say,” Azazel followed up, “that to wrong Lilith is to incur Lucifer’s wrath like nothing else. His devotion to her has not abated in thousands of years.” He gave me a look from underneath his lashes. “Be careful when you speak to her.”

I swallowed past the knot of unease in my throat. “Got it.” Frowning, I added, “Wait. If Lucifer and Lilith are such an item, how come he had a child with Daevi?” Devoted, my ass.

Azmodea smirked. “Whoever said their relationship is exclusive?”

My expression must have shown my bafflement, because Azmodea gently added, “Devotion and love don’t equal monogamy. Consensual polyamory is a thing, you know.”

My cheeks heated. “I do know that,” I muttered.

“Both Lucifer and Lilith are happy to invite others into their bed,” Azmodea went on. “It’s quite common among our kind. Demons like to share.”

“Not all of us,” Azazel said silkily, his eyes full of lightning as he looked at me.

My face burned even hotter. “Good,” I whispered, and sent him a small smile.

CHAPTER 18

“ZOE.”

I paused in pulling on the dress Azazel had gifted me for the occasion—a luminous dream of intricate, red lacework across the sheer bodice and long sleeves, ending in a whirl of diaphanous fabric for the ankle-length skirt, the color of which segued from cream to blood red at the very bottom. The dress was see-through again in most places, with high slits among the skirt to give teasing glimpses of my legs up to my upper thigh when I walked.

I’d never in my life worn something so exquisite and fragile and absolutely stunning.

Turning to Azazel, who stood in front of the windows to the balcony outside his bedroom, I raised a brow in question. The look on his face gave me pause.

Eyes shuttered, he came closer, moved around me and worked the buttons on my back. “When we go to his court tonight,” he began, his voice holding a rough edge, “I will have to be...different.”

I frowned, but before I could interject with a question, he continued.

“As will you. The deal we made when Zaquiel came to visit...it still stands.”

I opened my mouth, closed it. Something heavy sank into my bones, chilling me. “I’ll be your pet.” I swallowed, nodded. “Of course.”

His hand paused on the last button. A gentle, tender caress of his finger over my nape, then his touch fell away. A second later, he reached around me with both hands, the sparkling object he was holding drawing my gaze.

In the mirror, I watched as he laid the choker necklace in place. Adorned with rubies and diamonds, the band fit snugly around my throat.

My chest constricted. Funny, wasn’t it, that the first piece of jewelry he gave me was a collar... and not a ring.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected. The churning in my stomach told me whatever it was, though, it didn’t chime with what I got.

Foolish, I berated myself. *Don’t be foolish*. After all, this was never meant to be real.

Right?

His gaze held storms as I met his eyes in the mirror.

“Let’s play,” I said with a smile.

And because I’d practiced my shielding in the past two weeks, he caught none of the thoughts flitting through my mind, none of the wondering how—despite my better senses—that pain in my heart felt real enough.



WE FLEW OVER THE HEAVILY PATROLLED BORDER TO LUCIFER'S TERRITORY, THE SENTRIES LETTING US pass only after checking Azazel's invitation. The same dreary, barren landscape shrouded in everlasting twilight gloom spread out beneath us, lit here and there by random fires. Howls and screeches rang in the air, and every now and then the haunting wails of the tortured souls reached over the rushing of the wind and the other horrifying sounds.

I shivered despite the searing heat of Hell.

Next to us flew Azmodea and Mammon. Azazel's nephew had casually strolled in at one of our last planning sessions, and when I asked Mammon whether he was joining our little soul heist, he said, "Oh no. I'm not suicidal. I'm just tagging along for the drama." A rap on the back of his head delivered by a scowling Azmodea had him throw up his hands. "Just kidding, just kidding! Of course I'll help."

As we now neared a cluster of lights in the distance, more and more shapes emerged from the semi-darkness around us. Demons, on their way to the festival, like us. I'd never get used to seeing winged humanoid beings just matter-of-factly populating the sky.

We touched down in what appeared to be a courtyard as wide as a football field, flames reflecting off the pristine white stone of the ground and buildings. I glanced down as my feet hit the floor—not a speck of ash on the smooth-as-glass stone. I briefly wondered at what kind of army of servants it must cost to keep the courtyard this clean. A show of wealth, of course. The ruler of Hell sure had to flaunt it.

Azmodea landed next to us and adjusted the glittery monstrosity of a dress she was wearing. An enormous petticoat flared the skirt out to a distance that would make it hard for anyone to even shake her hand, reminiscent of the fashion extremes of centuries past. Layers and layers of ruffled fabric bunched along and over the buffed-up skirt, glinting and sparkling pink in the light of the torches. The bodice was as tight as the skirt was loose, no doubt cinched with a corset around her waist. Embroidery adorned the fabric above the skirt, with sequins catching the firelight much as the glitter below did.

Not for the first time, I wondered if she wore this fashion abomination in the attempt to get a rise out of Lucifer. Or at least cause him eye strain. I know I couldn't look at her for more than five seconds without getting a headache.

When I asked her why in Hell she'd chosen this dress, she just smiled and winked.

It probably wasn't to hide any weapons because we all carried some openly. Azazel had two swords strapped to his back, Mammon sported daggers in sheaths on his thighs, Azmodea had what looked like miniature crossbows fastened to her arms, and even I was allowed a weapon—the dagger Azazel had gifted me dangled from a decorative, thin belt at my waist.

I'd been visibly puzzled why Lucifer would permit the festival guests to come armed, thinking of the tight security an event like this would entail in most human societies. Demon mentality, it seemed, worked a bit different. According to Azazel, if Lucifer required visitors to come unarmed, it would be a sign of weakness on his part. As if he believed he wouldn't be able to fight off an attack, either by his own power alone, or with the help of his loyal guard.

Apparently, such an attack happened every so often, the Fall Festival being a notorious opportunity for it, and each time Lucifer squashed the uprising with brutal efficiency. From Azazel and Azmodea's accounts, it sounded like he took great pleasure in it too.

With that thought at the forefront of my mind, I followed Azazel and the others into the entrance hall. Each step took me further into Lucifer's home, our upcoming meeting looming ahead of us like a storm front. My heart thundered in my chest, nerves making me jittery. I tried to slow my breathing and focused on my surroundings.

The huge entrance hall stretched out for what seemed like hundreds of yards, the high ceiling held up by pillars that rose out of the landscape of pools and fountains. When Mephistopheles mentioned Lucifer had a water garden of preposterous proportions, he hadn't been kidding. This wasn't just a garden, it was a water *park*.

Reflecting pools hewn from marble, waterfalls tumbling over jeweled rock formations, water spouting from exquisitely carved fountains in a mix of natural-seeming shapes and sophisticated architecture that should have looked incongruous but somehow made beautiful sense. Dozens of paths diverged from the main walkway.

Whoever wanted an audience with Lucifer had to come through this ostentatious show of wealth in Hell's arid climate.

But the symbolism didn't end there.

Where the water garden impressed with beauty and elegance and the explicit message of riches and resources, the hallway beyond served to cow and subjugate.

It took me a moment to realize the extent of it, because at first my gaze was inexorably drawn to the wings on the walls. I suffered a momentary flashback to Azazel's own collection in his entrance hall, but if that one made my hindbrain wake up and take the wheel, Lucifer's macabre menagerie of severed wings caused my entire brain to crash with screeching tires.

The hallway was as wide as Azazel's entrance hall, its walls as high, only it stretched on and on ahead of us, and along the entire length—and up toward the ceiling—wings plastered the walls in such tight formation that the stone behind them wasn't visible anymore. A gruesome, feathered wallpaper.

Movement on the floor made me tear my gaze away from the proof of the hundreds—thousands?—of foes Lucifer vanquished.

"Don't look down," Azazel murmured and reached out to lift my chin as I dipped my head.

Too late.

My steps faltered. Nausea exploded in my stomach. "Are those—"

Azazel laid a hand on my lower back, gently urged me onward. "Just block it out."

Bile rose up to my throat. "But—what—"

"The most egregious offenses against his rule, Lucifer punishes with imprisonment here."

"In the *floor*?" I squeaked.

"So all who wish to speak with him are reminded of the consequences of crossing him."

As far as psychologically targeted cruelty went, this was impressive, if nauseating. The ones being punished had to watch, helplessly and in pain, as visitors walked along right over them, and the ones seeking audience with Lucifer got a vivid impression of why they should behave when they faced the lord of Hell.

"But—" I hyperventilated, flailed toward the ground without looking down again. "The rats?"

I covered my mouth with my hand, barely keeping the contents of my stomach from decorating the floor.

The *glass* floor, directly underneath which one demon after another lay chained to a subfloor—alive—to be snacked on by rodents vaguely reminiscent of rats. At least the glass was thick enough to muffle the screams.

“We are immortal, and many of us are jaded by time and near invincibility,” he said, the soothing tone of his voice at odds with his words. “For punishment to be effective, it has to be brutal and merciless. You know the Greek myth of Prometheus having his liver picked over and over by the eagle? Same principle.”

“It doesn’t seem to be effective, though,” I whispered. “As a deterrent, I mean. If it were, there wouldn’t be any attacks on Lucifer ever.”

Azazel considered that. “Who’s to say,” he eventually replied, “how many more attacks there’d be if he showed more leniency?”

I grimaced.

It took all my concentration not to look down again and to keep walking, knowing dozens of pairs of eyes followed my steps, no doubt imploring us to help. In front of us and behind us, more demons strolled down the hallway toward the throne room. In stark contrast to the weighted silence among our little group, the other revelers chatted and laughed, unaffected by the plight of the demons trapped beneath their feet. I wondered whether they truly didn’t care, or if maybe their nonchalant gaiety was a psychological coping mechanism.

Finally, we emerged into a grand lobby of sorts, with curving staircases on the sides leading to the upper levels of the palace, and a set of giant double doors in the opposite wall—thrown open to reveal the throne room beyond. More demons milled about here in the lobby, standing in groups and talking, all of them clad in either impressively posh combat gear—more ceremonial than practical, I guessed—or elegant party attire in all sorts of different styles. In addition to western outfits like pants/shirts combo and dresses, I recognized several traditional clothes from cultures all over the world—saris, kaftans, cheongsams, kimonos... The garments were as diverse as the demons wearing them.

Music drifted out of the open doors to the throne room, and what I could see over the heads of the demons in the lobby hinted at yet another huge hall. So far, everything in Lucifer’s palace was of epic proportions... It spoke to my dire state of mind that I didn’t feel like making a joke about how someone sure seemed in need of compensating.

As we passed the groups of demons on our way to the throne room, whispers followed us, my skin prickling with the awareness of dozens of pairs of eyes riveting on us. When I dared a glance at some of the onlookers, the sneers on too many of their faces tightened my stomach. Not for myself, but because the contempt and derision was clearly leveled at Azazel.

These were the ones who’d been there, thousands of years ago, when Azazel was a boy who’d just lost his father and his mother in short succession and found himself friendless and bullied at this very court. They’d hurt him then, gouged wounds into his psyche that cut deep, still bled today.

Outwardly, Azazel looked as coldly calm as a wintry mountain lake, his stride confident. His energy, too, wove around him in almost bored nonchalance, and if it weren’t for the faint touch of the bond between us, I’d have believed his facade.

As it was, I felt the tight coil of his power as an echo inside me. It vibrated with tension, a bite of feral aggression to it.

I’d felt that kind of energy before. When I was fourteen, my mom and I had gone to the animal shelter to get a cat. I’d begged to have one for years, and after the divorce, even though money was tight, my mom granted me my wish, probably hoping for some emotional support animal effect.

On the way to the cat cages, we passed the dog kennels, and there was this one pit bull wedged into the farthest corner of his kennel, currently snarling with bared fangs at the volunteer who tried to socialize him. I stopped and stared, and the lady escorting us to the cats explained that the pittie had

been used as bait in illegal fighting, his muzzle taped shut so he wouldn't be able to defend himself. He didn't do well with other dogs, and his trust in humans had been beaten out of him as well.

And as ferocious as he now seemed, with his cropped ears flattened on his head, his teeth flashing and saliva dropping from his muzzle as he loosed growl after growl that raised the hairs on my neck, he was scared and hurt more than anything, the lady explained.

What I'd felt that day from the pit bull, it tasted painfully similar to the buzzing echo of Azazel's energy now. Yet again, it drove home how much it must cost him to come here.

Ire rose inside my veins as I watched those coldly contemptuous faces. They'd taunted and jeered at a boy already broken by tragedy, a *child*, and looking at them now, I knew they'd do the same all over again. Thousands of years, and they hadn't developed a scrap of empathy, it seemed.

I get it now, I mentally pushed to Azazel.

What?

How tearing wings off a body might be very satisfactory indeed.

The tiniest twitch upward at the corners his mouth. *Extremely.*

We finally strode into the throne room, through those doors large enough for a jet to pass through. The cavernous hall beyond was hewn from glittering stone, upheld throughout by countless huge pillars, each with intricate carvings depicting scenes of battle and revelry. Sparkling chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, casting patterns of light and shadow over the crowd.

And what a crowd.

The room was teeming with demons, dancing in groups and single to the hypnotizing rhythm of the music. Bodies writhed and undulated, their movements as enthralling as the beat of the drums. I squinted, drew back and flushed with heat.

Um, yeah, they were doing a lot more than just dancing.

Azazel had been right when he'd laughed at my thinking the meeting with Zaquiel was an orgy. That had been *tame*.

There was nothing tame about this. The scent of sex hung heavy in the air, moans rose above the notes of the music, and everywhere I looked I spotted at least one pair—or threesome, or foursome, or...—going at it right in the open. Roaming hands, exposed flesh, lips on skin, teeth skimming nipples, thrusting hips...

The onslaught of impressions left me reeling. I was surprised there wasn't steam rising from my skin, what with how on fire I felt.

Azazel's hand on my nape made me jump.

You okay?

Sure, sure, yeah. If I could have mentally cleared my throat, I would have. *So this is what you guys get up to on the weekends.*

His mental voice held a hint of amusement. *Hell is a shithole and immortality holds endless ennui. We take pleasure where we can find it.*

Not judging, I replied. *Just...* I tilted my head as I studied one particularly enthusiastic couple. ... *taking notes.*

He laughed under his breath, and the sound caused a flutter of warmth in my chest. I did that—made the tight coil inside him loosen for a moment, made him think of something else, something better than the strain of coming here, or the anxiety about what awaited us.

All too soon, however, that brief moment of levity evaporated. The crowd parted in front of us... to reveal a large dais with two lounge-like thrones on it, framed by a few settees on either side. Guards in black-and-gold livery surrounded the dais. Demons sprawled on those sofas, and on the

two thrones sat... what I assumed must be Lucifer and Lilith. If the fact that her seat was of the same size as his was any indication, she really did rule as his equal then.

The echo of Azazel's energy in me snapped taut, and I quickly studied the two figures as we approached before I'd have to lower my gaze. The most surprising aspect about Lucifer was probably that his hair was *blond*. I had to blink several times to make sure I saw right. For some reason, I'd always imagined him dark-haired, maybe due to how he was preferably pictured in popular media? In any case, despite my personal confusion, it did fit with the rest of his appearance.

Like the most exquisite masterpiece of one of the great sculptors, his features seemed so finely hewn as to appear otherworldly, skin like white marble with a silver sheen, his beauty so striking that it hurt to look at him directly, as if gazing into a small sun. I had to avert my eyes after a few seconds. The brightest star in Heaven, indeed.

He lounged on his throne with the careless arrogance of the god-kings of old, clad in a black tunic and pants embroidered with stylized golden stars along the seams. A dark crown sat upon his head, the light of the chandeliers glinting off the slate black metal.

My eyes tracked to Lilith on the throne next to him. Where Lucifer seemed ethereal, she was all earthen beauty, glowing with an inner fire that shone from her features, flared with every movement. The flickering candles painted her light brown skin in hues of gold and amber, kissed the curls of her loose, black hair with a warm shine and sparked off the golden headdress she wore like a crown. A necklace of emeralds draped down toward the deep cut of her dress, the green of the jewels echoed by the silken fabric. Several gold bracelets in varying thickness adorned her wrists, her elegant fingers decorated with rings.

Those few seconds of openly taking in the ruling couple of Hell was all I got before we'd reached the space in front of the dais, and I dutifully lowered my gaze in deference. I barely saw the furtive movement of Azmodea and Mammon vanishing in the crowd.

Kneel, Azazel spoke inside my head.

I swiftly knelt just as Azazel went down on one knee as well and bowed his head. The cold of the stone seeped into my knees and shins.

"Your Grace," Azazel said in greeting.

While the music played on, and the sounds of the revelry continued to echo in the hall, the immediate crowd around us hushed.

"The prodigal grandson returns." Lucifer's voice held a melodious quality, enthralling in its purity and cadence. It wrapped around me like a soft caress. He *tsked*. "Rise."

Not you, Azazel warned me. *Stay on your knees, eyes down*.

I obeyed, forcing my hands not to shake. I would *not* fuck this up for Azazel by blundering. *For once in my life*, I silently prayed, *please, let my social awkwardness not trip me up*.

"It's good to see you again," Lucifer said. "It has been far too long since you last graced my hall with your presence."

I could only imagine the things Azazel would love to spit at him in response, but of course he bit his tongue, too smart to antagonize someone more powerful who was already out for his blood. Figuratively, I hoped. I didn't want to contemplate the consequences if Lucifer decided to upgrade from emotional abuse to physical maiming.

"Thank you for your invitation, Your Grace," was all that Azazel replied, with less hostility than I would have been able to muster.

"Hmm."

It was hard to keep my gaze glued to the ground during the ensuing pause. I *so* wanted to watch

Lucifer's features for supplemental info about his mood and intentions, but to look directly at him would be an insult we couldn't afford. So I took great care to study the gold veins in the black marble of the floor.

"And you brought such a nice surprise," Lucifer continued. "Your lovely *pet*. I must admit I was struck by curiosity when I heard you had a human living in your home. Such an unusual arrangement. Most debts are paid postmortem. We reap souls, after all, not bodies." His chuckle was echoed by the demons on the dais with him.

It spoke to Azazel's prudence that he remained silent—because for all of Lucifer's insinuations, he hadn't actually asked a question. Why should Azazel defend himself without prompting?

"Let me see how well she is trained."

Tension grabbed me like an iron fist. I studied the gold veins *hard*.

"Your Grace?"

"I want to take a good look at her. Tell her to come to me."

I barely kept my face from showing my confusion. Why not just give me the order himself?

Azazel's hand on my head, warm and gentle. "Stand," he said quietly. "Go to His Grace."

I was just flexing my thigh muscles to rise when Lucifer clucked his tongue.

"I didn't say she could walk."

Low laughter, followed by a beat of silence. My heart thundered so loud I could have sworn every demon in the hall must have heard it.

"Make her crawl," Lucifer purred.

The ensuing pause dragged on long enough to cause me worry. Azazel's fingers on my head twitched, the beacon of his energy inside me tasting acidic.

Zoe, he said in my mind, his mental voice rough. *You don't need—*

It's okay, I replied. *I'll do it*.

He walked back into his nightmare for me. If my crawling across the floor would save his face, I'd fucking do it.

"Crawl," he ordered, followed by a mentally whispered, *I'm sorry*.

Swallowing against the sting of my pride, I lowered my trembling hands to the floor, and crawled. The high slits in my dress allowed me to move my knees forward without tripping on the fabric. With the dais a good ten feet away, it took me maybe twenty seconds to cross the distance.

It felt like an hour.

The attention of the scores of demons present weighed heavily on me. Amused murmurs and sneering sounds followed my progress, the kind of sounds you'd make to call an animal.

A pet.

By the time I reached the steps of the dais, my entire upper body burned with embarrassment. Underneath that, however, boiled my notorious spite, so welcome now in this moment. Because it helped me not to show any of the mortification I felt when I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and inclined my head toward Lucifer. He wanted to embarrass me, hm? He wouldn't get to see even an iota of my discomfort.

I bolstered my inner defenses with the grim pleasure of the knowledge that we'd soon be stealing a soul right out of his fucking palace with him none the wiser, so whatever sick entertainment he demanded before then didn't matter. Getting my father out did. Robbing Lucifer in the process was icing on the cake.

"Come closer."

I saw Lucifer beckon me out of the periphery of my eyes. Tentatively, I crawled up the stairs onto

the dais, halting—on my knees still—right in front of his throne. His boots and lower legs filled my vision.

“Good girl,” Lucifer crooned.

I wanted to throat-punch him. *I’m going to steal from you*, I thought with smug satisfaction, making sure my mental shields were adamantine in strength.

“Now,” he went on, leaning forward and lifting my head with one finger under my chin, “let me look at you.”

I was smarter than to meet his gaze. Not just out of required deference, but for safety reasons too. Who knew what kind of power he’d have over me with direct eye contact?

I focused on his nose instead. Straight, aristocratic, a masterpiece of nasal form. As far as schnozzles went, his was beyond reproach, truly worthy of—

“Quite ordinary,” Lucifer said, rudely interrupting my anxious mental rambling.

Ordinary? Oh, that motherf—

“But maybe there’s some hidden charm?” he went on, blissfully unaware of the names I called him in the privacy of my mind. “Some quirk beyond your unremarkable appearance that would move Azazel to bring you here before your time?”

Unremarkable. I wanted to *mark* his face with my nails.

“Ah, but it would be remiss of me not to offer you refreshments first.” He scratched underneath my chin with his finger, and I suppressed a repulsive shudder. “Here, pet.”

A cup appeared in his other hand, and he brought it to my mouth. I recoiled at the golden liquid inside. *Amrit*.

No, no, no. Azazel had warned me about this. The memory of his meeting with Zaquiel flashed in my mind, the cautionary way he talked about amrit, how it did *unpredictable things* to humans.

I clamped my lips shut tight.

“Drink,” Lucifer ordered, his voice silk wrapped over steel.

Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck. There was no polite way to refuse a direct order from the devil. Sweat beaded on my forehead.

“Your Grace,” Azazel quietly said from behind me, “she shouldn’t—”

“Do not,” Lucifer cut him off with soft menace, “spurn the hospitality of my hall.”

I could feel Azazel’s desperate frustration roll against my back like a wave crashing onto a cliff.

“Drink,” Lucifer said again, and set the cup against my lips.

To refuse would be an affront, and I’d sworn not to fuck this up.

Chest tight with foreboding, I opened my mouth and drank.

CHAPTER 19

SWEET TASTE EXPLODED IN MY MOUTH, WARMTH PRICKLING DOWN MY THROAT AS I SWALLOWED. LIKE freshly made wine, fruity and sugary, the amrit tickled my taste buds and went straight to my head.

“There now,” Lucifer murmured. “A bit more.”

He made me drink the whole damn cup. Not a minute after I’d swallowed the last of it, the effects hit me like a bat to my brain.

Exhilaration rushed through me, a thousand tiny explosions of euphoria that made me gasp and smile. The world tilted sideways. I swayed, flailed, caught in the rocking of a ship on a stormy sea.

Something grabbed me. A kraken? I slapped at the tentacles. If those suckers got a hold of my dress, they’d ruin the beautiful fabric!

“Bad octopus,” I snapped.

A low male laugh. It sounded contagious, mesmerizing. I turned toward the sound. Overlaid by rainbow sparkles, Lucifer’s face came into focus.

“Oh, you,” I whispered. There was something about him I should have remembered, something tickling in the back of my brain, but the rainbow sparkles distracted me. I looked down at where he held me upright with his hands around my shoulders. “You don’t have tentacles.”

“Sadly, no.” He did sound sad.

“That would be interesting,” a woman said.

My head swiveled in her direction. *Lilith*. She smiled at me, and I smiled right back.

“You’re so pretty,” I whispered, awestruck.

“Thank you.” Her voice was honey and warm summer nights, and I just wanted to lie at her feet and gaze up at her.

I leaned forward to do just that, but Lucifer pulled me back upright. I tilted my head to follow the way the room canted to the right. I floated, happy, giggling.

“Eyes on me,” Lucifer said, and turned my face toward him with a hand under my chin.

I frowned at him. “You look weird.” I waved in the general direction of his head.

“Is it the lack of horns?” The corners of his mouth twitched upward. “It tends to confuse people.”

“No.” I narrowed my eyes. “It’s your hair. Why are you blond?”

He laughed, and I laughed with him. Giddy, I felt so giddy.

“How did you come to be here in Hell?” he asked.

“Well, I came through a hellgate, duh.”

“Right. But why?”

“Cause Earth and Hell are different dimensions,” I said slowly, as if explaining it to a child. Leaning in, I added in a whisper, “I thought you knew that.”

Chuckles all around me, and I smiled and turned to see who was laughing, only to inexplicably lose my balance and keel over. I couldn't feel my legs. Oh, God, where did my legs go? I patted down my body and rifled through the folds of my dress until my hands touched my legs. *Oh, thank fuck, they're still attached to me.*

Lucifer grabbed my elbow, pulled me up and made me sit on his lap. The room spun, but I didn't mind. The butterflies in my stomach said it was okay.

"Are you really Azazel's pet?" Lucifer's question drew my attention to him again.

"Pet *peeve*," I corrected with a raised finger. I frowned at that finger. "Have you ever noticed how strange fingers are?"

I bent it, straightened it again, fascinated by the motion. Grinning, I used that finger to boop Lucifer on his masterpiece of a nose.

Someone made a strangled sound.

Oh, no. I tensed, half-turned and yelled, "Quick, someone's choking! We need a Heimlich maneuver!"

I was about to get off Lucifer's lap to help, but he held me fast with his hands on my waist.

"Why would Azazel be peeved by you?"

I turned back to him. "'Cause he didn't want any of this to begin with."

"Ah." He stroked my cheek. His eyes were blue, I noticed. Turquoise blue, like the ocean in those places with white sand beaches. "And what is 'this?' Tell me, Zoe, what's the deal you made with him?"

"Well," I began, biting my lip, "it's equal parts funny and embarrassing."

"That's all right." His smile was reassuring. "We're all friends here."

"Okay." I grinned and rubbed my nose. "So, when I was thirteen, my best friend and I were a bit romantically challenged, you know, and, like, totally scared of ending up alone. I mean, I'd never even had a boyfriend at that time, and the way my face was breaking out, I wasn't sure that would ever change. There's a reason there are no photos of me left over from that time." I gave him a significant look.

He nodded, his eyes twinkling, like the sun sparkling on ocean waves. Chin on his hand, a faint smile on his face, he regarded me with such utter attention that warmth bubbled through my veins. "Do go on."

"Anywho, so Taylor and I got this wild idea to make sure we would be spared the horrible fate of staying single—" I rolled my eyes "—and we decided to hold a séance-summoning thingy with this old book that was mostly gibberish that I found in our attic. We didn't expect anything to happen, really, but it actually worked! Well, for me, at least. Tay chickened out and ran because the lights flickered, but I was in the middle of what turned out to be a demon summoning, and...it's bit blurry from there, but the gist of it is that I ended up in this deal with Azazel where he'd have to marry me if I'm still single at twenty-five, which just happened recently, and so now I'm here."

I waved my arm to indicate the whole of Hell, and almost toppled over. Lucifer caught me before I slid off his lap. He was really good at that! Demons around us chuckled. I giggled.

Something stung in my chest, and I gasped and rubbed a hand over my breastbone. An echo of a dark, hot feeling pinged inside me, and I frowned, poked at my chest. That wasn't my feeling. *I* was feeling great! The world was far too sparkly to feel anything but happy. How weird.

"So Azazel is *married*?" Lucifer drawled.

"Yep."

Snickers rose around us.

“To a human who tricked him? When she was a child?”

The snickers turned to outright laughter.

“Well, I wouldn’t say *tricked*.” I squinted. “I mean, I didn’t even know what I was doing, not really. I thought it was a fun little spell or something.”

“Of course,” Lucifer said, his voice full of mirth, his chest shaking with silent laughter.

His amusement was echoed by the demons surrounding us, their chuckles almost drowning out the music. I wanted to laugh along with them, but that burning hot feeling in my chest didn’t let me. I scratched at my breastbone, trying to dislodge the feeling that reminded me too much of mortification.

Lucifer asked me something, but I didn’t hear what. The giant soap bubble floating behind his head distracted me something fierce. I leaned forward to pop it, but for some reason my coordination was off and I ended up poking my finger in Lucifer’s eye.

Or would have, if he hadn’t caught my hand at the last second.

“Phew, good catch,” I breathed.

He winked, brought my hand to his mouth, and nibbled at the tip of my still outstretched finger. I squirmed and slapped my hand free with my other hand. Neat to have two hands, wasn’t it?

“Nooooo,” I whispered harshly to Lucifer, cradling my hand that was smarting from where I’d slapped it to my chest. “You mustn’t do that. I’m a married woman. And I’m faithful.”

“To Azazel,” Lucifer said, his eyes full of mischief. “And he to you.” He pressed his lips together, obviously trying hard to hold back laughter. “The powerful, cunning Azazel, bound in holy matrimony to a human, for all eternity.” With his next words, the laughter burst past his restraint. “Trapped by the blundering incompetence of a foolish child.”

Guffaws and jeers rose all around us, and the dark, twisted, burning feeling in my chest flared up, seared off the edges of the happy fog I was in. I frowned, rubbed at my chest again, something nauseous and heavy churning in my guts.

“Hey,” I muttered, glaring at Lucifer. “That’s mean.”

“You don’t say,” he purred with a smile as sharp as a dagger’s edge. “I wonder, though, whether it wasn’t so much *your* incompetence as it was his. To stumble right into a summoning trap performed by a witless human youngling...” He clucked his tongue, a cruel twist to his mouth. “That takes a special talent in ineptitude, don’t you think?”

More laughter all around us, but this time I didn’t feel like joining in, despite the euphoria still wrapping me in soft, happy cotton that wouldn’t allow for any worries. Something seemed...off? And it wasn’t because I was keeling over yet again—Lucifer held me tight on his lap.

He was about to say something else when a thunderous boom rocked the hall. In an instant, Lucifer shoved me to the ground and rose to his feet. I hit the floor with an *oomph*, pain shooting up my hip and side where I’d landed. The world spun as if I were on a merry-go-round, and I flailed as chaos reined around me, more explosions going off near and far, Lucifer barking orders, demons running, and...glitter swirling through the air?

I uttered a delighted gasp, then squealed when someone grabbed me and threw me over a shoulder as they hauled me off.

“Wheeeee!” I grinned and stretched out my arms, pretending to fly backward.

Pink glitter rained down on me as I bounced with the hurried steps of whoever carried me. I stuck out my tongue to taste it and immediately regretted my decision. *Ugh*. Not sweet at all.

While I pouted, my gaze fell on the two swords strapped to the back of the demon over whose shoulder I was draped. I reached for the handle of one, kept missing, and got it on the third try. With a triumphant *whoop*, I unsheathed the blade and proceeded to brandish it toward the chaotic crowd we

were leaving behind.

“My name is Inigo Montoya,” I yelled. “You killed my father. Prepare to die!”

The demon who carried me growled, reached back with one arm and wrested the sword from my grip.

Not a *Princess Bride* fan, then. Pity.

I was about to grab the second sword when the flex of the demon’s ass drew my attention. *Well, hello.* Stretching both arms, I tried to reach down to pinch the firmest backside I ever did see, only to ball my hands to fists at the last second.

No, no, bad. Faithful, remember? I shouldn’t go around fondling random demons’ butts.

But it looked so touchable, dammit! I stretched down again.

No, bad Zoe! I yanked my hands back and bit my lip.

“Stop wriggling,” the demon snarled, and I gasped, recognizing the voice.

“Azazel!” A huge smile spread on my face. “Oh, thank goodness it’s you.”

No wonder I’d been craving to touch that booty! I immediately stretched down again and squeezed both his cheeks with a delighted sigh. *Hmmmmm.*

“Zoe.” A strangled growl.

I fondled him some more. “You have the best ass. The. Best.” I emphasized the last two words with an affectionate slap on each cheek.

“Quit that,” he bit out.

I opened my mouth to give a retort, but the sudden jerking movement of Azazel cut me off. A slash, a grunt, and then something warm sprayed my face. I blinked, looked at the crumpling form of a demon as Azazel hurried past.

“Did you just stab that guy?”

“Yes.”

“You should chop off his wings!”

“No.”

“I could hold them, and we could take them back home, and I’ll hang them on your wall.”

Azazel’s answer was a muttered, “Hell give me patience,” to which I probably would have taken great offense if the flying elephant hadn’t distracted me. I enthusiastically waved at it, but my gesture was lost as the throne room vanished out of sight. Azazel had just walked into a hallway off the big room, the sounds of the melee hushing when the door fell shut behind us.

“Awww,” I whined. “I was just making friends with Dumbo.”

I felt more than heard Azazel’s mighty sigh, his back muscles contracting and releasing under my hands. He seemed aggravated for some reason. Probably because he didn’t have time to rip off those wings. It would have soothed him.

The door opened again and in strode my sister-in-law.

“Azmodea!” I shouted with glee.

She’d somehow managed to change clothes. Her voluminous dress gone, she now wore tight-fitting leather pants and a black, steampunk-ish looking top that accentuated her fiery hair.

“I love your outfit!” I gave her two thumbs up.

“What took you so long?” Azazel grated as he rounded on her.

I didn’t see her anymore since Azazel had turned to her, but her voice held an edge that made me think she had at least one hand on her hip and a death glare on her face.

“Well, excuse *you*, because I *know* you didn’t just snap at me after I spent the last half hour planting the bombs around the hall while making sure none of the guards got wind of it. I think what

you *meant* to say is *thank you*.”

“You tell him, girl!” I yelled.

“Where’s Mammon?” Azazel’s voice sounded clipped.

“Setting off the last of the glitter bombs and causing more havoc. He’ll meet us back home.”

“Glitter!” I cried and clapped my hands. “I love glitter!”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Amrit,” Azazel growled.

“You let her drink that?”

“I didn’t!” he roared.

“Don’t you roar at me,” she hissed.

“Yeah,” I said, pinching his butt. “We don’t roar at people. That’s rude.”

Azazel turned on his heels and marched farther down the hallway. Bouncing with his every step, I glanced back at Azmodea, who jogged to catch up with him.

I grinned and waved at her. “Did you see the flying elephant?”

“Maybe we should knock her out,” Azmodea murmured as she fell into step next to him.

I jerked upright as much as possible. “What?”

“She’d be less of a liability,” she went on as if I hadn’t spoken.

“I can hear you!” I twisted to try to glower at her, but all I accomplished was to bump my butt against Azazel’s face.

“Good idea,” he ground out. “If we don’t, she’ll draw every damn guard’s attention.”

“I’m literally right here!” I wiggle-bumped his face some more for good measure.

Azmodea appeared in my line of vision. “Sorry, kiddo. Has to be done.”

And before I could protest more, she laid her fingers on my forehead and whispered, “Sleep.”

Darkness took me.



I CAME TO WITH A POUNDING HEADACHE.

Pain throbbed inside my skull with the force of a jackhammer. I tried to open my eyes, but my lids wouldn’t move, as if they were glued shut. Sluggish, my thoughts were so sluggish. God, that freight train in my head, it just wouldn’t stop. What happened?

Voices drifted over to me. An argument in harsh whispers.

“I *know* this place,” Azazel snapped. “And if we go this way, we’ll avoid them.”

“That leads us deeper into the palace,” Azmodea’s taut voice. “At this rate, we’ll never get out of here. We have to go up and try to find a window that will open.”

“If we go up, we’ll run right into the fighting. We need to go down and around.”

“Through these awesome hidden pathways.” Her tone was dripping with acid.

“Yes. I used them all the time when I lived here.”

“Two thousand five hundred years ago! How do you know they haven’t changed?”

“Why would they change?” he barked.

“Oh, I don’t know...maybe because Lucifer might have done some remodeling in *two fucking millennia*?”

Jesus, their yelling was splitting my skull. I wanted to tell them to tone it down, but my mouth was full of cotton, my tongue swollen to twice its usual size. Not even mental communication worked—my

mind felt like sticky goo and I couldn't for the life of me get a precise thought together and push it to Azazel.

What the fuck happened to me?

Again, I tried to pry my eyes open, and this time I succeeded. The light stabbed at me like a dagger straight through my eyeballs and into my brain. *Ouch*. After blinking a couple of times, my surroundings came into focus and stopped spinning.

I was sitting propped against the wall of a gloomy corridor, Azazel and Azmodea standing several yards away, still arguing.

"For all we know," Azmodea said, "you could lead us straight into Lucifer's personal chambers."

"Not if we go down!"

"But at some point we have to go up again! And then what?"

My mouth still wouldn't cooperate, my brain on the frizz, and waving my arm—almost hitting myself in the face in the process—to get their attention didn't work. They were too absorbed in their yelling match. Were siblings always so argumentative? I wouldn't know.

The images of the two girls I'd seen in my dad's new home flashed through my mind, and my chest ached. I could have had that, though. Sisters. If things had gone differently, if the festering wound inside me could have healed years earlier, maybe I could have gotten to know my two half-sisters. I might have even liked them. Now I'd never know.

And with that, my sluggish thoughts swung toward the very reason we were even here. *My dad!*

I sat up straighter, wincing at the pain pounding my skull. Did Azazel get him? Had he already gone down into the Pit and gotten his soul? They were talking about getting out of the palace, so either we were now trying to head home after a successful mission...or we were cutting our losses and abandoning the cause in favor of getting the fuck out.

I had no idea what had happened between us entering the throne room and now. When I tried to sift through my memories to figure it out, the pain in my head intensified from the effort. What the fuck? I couldn't have just blacked out.

As for my father's soul, there was no way to tell if Azazel had it on him—it wouldn't show if he did. As he'd explained to me before we embarked on our heist, he'd use a small container made for carrying souls from Earth to Hell. Souls were spirit only, their ghostly forms but memories of their human body. They didn't necessarily *need* to be in their full form and could easily be compressed into a smaller shape to be stored or transported. Demons did it all the time when catching and bringing sinners to Hell. Apparently, lugging full-form souls around was too much of a hassle.

When I'd asked, with no small amount of dismay, "You're going to *Ghostbuster* my dad?" Azazel assured me it wouldn't hurt my father's soul to be squeezed into a box. I was still skeptical about that.

I needed to ask Azazel about my dad, but first I had to get my body to obey simple commands, like *speak words*, *stand up*, or *stop drooling*. Grimacing, I flailed and wiggled in slow motion until my muscles did their thing and I was able to stagger to my feet, using the wall behind me as a crutch.

So far, so good.

I caught my breath for a moment, listening to Azazel and Azmodea's continued arguing. Something about insurgents blocking the way, Lucifer's guards, fighting, and someone's lack of orientation, which seemed to be an established point of contention between the two siblings.

"I'm not the one who got lost in the dungeons," Azmodea snapped.

"I was five!" Azazel bared his teeth. "And I distinctly remember you couldn't find your way out of the Dragon's Tail Garden either!"

"Because it's a maze! It's meant to be confusing!"

“Keep telling yourself that, maybe it’ll become true.”

Azmodea looked like she was one second away from strangling him. *Oh, no.* If they went at each other’s throats, we’d never get out of here.

I opened my mouth to test again if I could finally speak when pain flared up from my ankle. I screamed. Something yanked my leg out from under me, I stumbled and crashed face first into the floor, barely breaking the fall with my hands.

Screeching, I caught Azazel and Azmodea’s alarmed looks as I was dragged over the ground away from them at mind-boggling speed. I scraped over stone and jagged pebbles, my dress bunching up around my waist, my limbs flailing helplessly.

It all happened so fast. One moment I was leaning against the wall trying to get my bearings, and the next instant I disappeared down a dark hole, hauled by something with sharp teeth lodged tight in my ankle.

Darkness closed in, walls streaming by. The beast pulled me farther back while I grasped in vain to get ahold of the walls, the floor, anything to stop my descent into what seemed to be a small tunnel...like the burrow of an animal.

“Azazel!” I cried, hopeless though it was. I’d barely fit through the hole, and the sides of the tunnel touched my shoulders and hips... Azazel wouldn’t be able to come after me, and neither would Azmodea—she was taller than me, the tunnel much too narrow.

I screamed as the beast hauled me around a bend and my back and head hit the walls. Vision blurry, head ringing, I lost sight of the burrow’s entrance. Around a curve again, down another path, turning another corner.

Crap.

If there were other tunnels forking off this path, I’d be wandering this labyrinth trying to find my way back should I somehow manage to fight off this monster.

My entire body ached and burned, my bones rattled, my skin abraded and raw from all the dragging across the ground. *No matter.* I needed to prepare. At some point, the beast would be far enough into its den and begin eating me. I had to have a plan.

Groaning and wincing, I managed to pull one hand down along my body—which was extremely difficult considering how narrow the tunnel was, giving me little room to maneuver, not to mention the continued hauling jostled me again and again. Hand near my hip, I fumbled for the dagger.

There. Thank fuck it hadn’t come loose in all the commotion. I grabbed the handle, but stilled at the thought of accidentally gutting myself if I pulled it now while I was still roller-coasting over the ground. Given my penchant for clumsiness, an unintentional evisceration was a real possibility. *Ugh.* Okay, I’d just keep the blade sheathed for now, my hand ready on the hilt.

Another corner, another bump of my head—as if the initial pounding in my skull when I’d woken hadn’t been enough, goddammit—and then cooler air licked over my ravaged body. Unlike before, the sounds of my being dragged echoed in the darkness. We must be in a larger tunnel or cavern now. I flailed with my free hand, couldn’t reach a wall. Did I have enough room to stab the beast? Only one way to find out.

Heart thundering, fear tightening my stomach, I unsheathed the blade with my right hand. As fast as I could manage, I twisted toward my feet and reached out with my left. I needed to grab the beast’s head, so I knew where exactly to stab.

With only the pain in my ankle as my guide in the pitch-black, I made contact with something furry and warm. Before I could swing the dagger, the beast let go of my ankle with a growl and snapped at my left hand.

Excruciating pain exploded in my fingers. I screamed, but I thrust the dagger forward anyway, aiming for my hand clamped in the beast's jaw. Even if I hit myself in the process, I was sure to slash the monster as well.

A thumping, wet sound as the blade met flesh and bone, the impact reverberating up my arm. The thing screeched and twisted. Gritting my teeth against the agony, I grasped blindly with my mangled left hand before the beast jerked away. My fingers closed around flesh and fur, and I held tight. Again and again, I stabbed with the dagger.

"I—" *stab* "—will not—" *stab* "—be—" *stab* "—your—" *stab* "—DINNER!"

Stabstabstab.

It took me a long moment to realize the beast wasn't thrashing anymore.

Breath heavy and fast, I stabbed it once more for good measure then shoved it off me and yelled out my fear and anger. Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

"You motherfucking bastard!" I screamed and kicked with my good leg at where I figured lay the carcass. It was so satisfying to feel my heel connect with the body.

I was shaking hard, my teeth clattering. The reality of the near-miss I'd just had crashed over me. The only other time I'd come this close to dying had been with the inferni, but someone else had saved me then.

This time, it was all me. No one around who would have come to my aid. Only me. And I'd *just* barely made it.

God.

I went to rub my hands over my face, then remembered one of them was mangled and the other still clutched the dagger in a death grip. Exhaling a trembling breath, I looked around, quite uselessly. The darkness was so complete, I couldn't see my hand even just inches from my face. How was I going to get out of here? I had no idea where the tunnel exit was.

I'd have to feel my way around the ground until I found a wall, and then go by touch from there, hopefully getting to the tunnel. I cringed at the thought of having to navigate the maze-like burrow in the unrelenting dark, not knowing which way would lead back to Azazel and Azmodea.

Going on all fours, the dagger still in my right hand, I favored the left hand and kept my right foot hovering off the floor to not drag the ankle where the beast had bitten me over the ground. I gritted my teeth against the insistent throb of pain in my wounds. I could really use some of Azazel's instant healing right now.

I'd just started moving when a sound made me freeze. Wings flapping, a whoosh of air, a soft thump.

My heart was in my throat, the dagger in my hand pointed toward the noise. Another beast?

So sad how you lot have to arm yourselves with blades to make up for your lack of claws and fangs, a voice said in my head.

That voice. That *voice*!

"M-mephistopheles?" My hand shook.

Are you expecting someone else?

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. "How did you get here?"

I'm a cat.

Ugh. "Okay, but seriously, how? Is there a way directly to Azazel's home? Can you show me?"

A pause. I could have sworn, if there were light, I'd have seen him leisurely blink at me as he took his sweet time to answer. *No*, he simply said.

"Why not?"

You're not a cat.

Ugggggh. "Mephisto," I grated. "Please help me."

Smacking sounds in the dark.

I gasped. "Are you *eating*?"

If you wanted to claim your kill, you shouldn't have crawled away from it. Finders keepers.

Ew. A full-body shudder wracked me. "Can you tell me which way the tunnel exit is?"

Yes.

I waited.

More chewing and smacking noises.

"So?" I asked.

So what?

I rolled my eyes in the dark. "So where is the tunnel exit?"

To your left. But I wouldn't go there if I were you.

"Why not?"

Because more hellrats are on their way here through that tunnel. I can hear them.

"What?" I almost dropped my dagger. "Wait—*more*? That thing I killed—that was a hellrat?"

My favorite kind of vermin.

"But—the beast I just stabbed was big enough to drag me. The rats I saw gnawing on those demons in Lucifer's entrance hall were smaller, like normal rats."

They grow bigger the deeper you go into the palace. Juicier too.

Crap. And ew. "Is there another tunnel I can take?"

No.

Well, fuck.

But you don't need a tunnel to leave this place.

"What do you mean?"

You have blood, don't you? And there's a nice wall to your right.

It took me precious seconds to realize what he was talking about. Then my eyes widened.

"Will his sigil work here too?" I was already crawling toward the wall he'd mentioned. "Will it get me to his house?"

No. The sigils don't work between estates.

"Then where will I end up?"

Does it matter? I'd imagine anywhere is better than here. At least for you. I have wings and another way out of here. You don't, which means you'll be rat chow in a matter of minutes.

I paused, contemplating the less than savory possibilities of how my situation could get worse depending on where the magical doorway would spit me out. "Couldn't you help me slay the rats?"

Child, he said with as much indulgence as I'd ever heard from him, no cat in their right mind would fight a whole pack of hellrats.

Okay, magical doorway it was.

As fast as I dared in the dark, I crawled over the ground to my right, swallowing down my rising bile at the crunching sounds and the feel of something hard breaking under my knees and my right hand. I had a good idea what those things were. I felt a sudden, visceral sympathy with Gimli from *Lord of the Rings* as he'd gingerly trod on the physical remains of the Army of the Dead in their mountain.

Having reached the wall, I felt my way up and found a flat enough part of it to draw the sigil. With the blood dripping from the wounds on my left hand, I painted the strokes of the symbol as I

remembered them. This had worked once before in the dark, I reminded myself. I could only hope it'd work again.

A flash of light. Too bright after the pitch-black, it blinded me for a few seconds as the sigil lit up then faded, leaving behind a darkness all the more stark for the brief interlude of light. I reached out and confirmed there was indeed an opening.

See you on the other side, Mephistopheles said, wry amusement in his tone. *Or rather, back at home*. A pondering pause. *If you make it*.

"Geez, Mephisto. Thanks for the vote of confidence."

You're welcome.

Sarcasm clearly wasn't his forte.

"Bye. And thank you for your help," I said and limped into the corridor. Before the doorway closed again, I turned and added, "If you see Azazel, tell him...tell him I'm not dead. Yet."

Those are to be your last words to him?

Oh, my God, I was being judged by a self-important cat.

"Fine!" I huffed. "Tell him I—I—" I flailed. "He's—"

The doorway closed and cut off my flustered sputtering, leaving me in the middle of trying to put into words what I hadn't even begun to understand.

Breath sawing in and out of my lungs, I stood there in the darkness of the magical corridor for a moment. Now that the threat of the hellrats had passed, my adrenaline ebbing, the very real possibility that I'd never get to see Azazel again was sinking in.

Who knew what awaited me on the other side? What if this time, I wouldn't be able to fight or sneak my way out of it?

The sharp pain in my chest had nothing to do with my physical wounds, yet it hurt just as keenly. I wanted to get back to him, not just to survive and be safe, but to be *with him*. He was fun, intriguing, sexy as fuck, and under that smoldering demon exterior beat a heart that was surprisingly...loving. Dammit, he'd grown on me. More than that. He'd snuck under my defenses, right past those walls I usually kept up in my relationships.

I'd been in love before with most of my previous boyfriends, yes, but I'd always held back a part of myself, had never let them see me vulnerable, had never *relied* on any of them. Why would I, when I never intended for them to become a permanent fixture in my life? To trust any of them with all of me under those circumstances was foolish.

I bit my lip as I considered how different *this* felt, this...whatever it was I had with Azazel. He'd seen me at my lowest, had seen me break apart, and he'd...taken care of me with a quiet kind of dedication that made something soft and intense curl and twist in my heart.

Did he have any idea what that did to me? How much it mattered?

How much *he* mattered to me?

He likely didn't—because I hadn't told him.

Oh, I was going to change that. If—when—I made it back to him, I'd let him know. I'd tell him that I lo—

My train of thought derailed spectacularly when, all at once, the chunk of memory I'd been missing fell back into place with a mental click that shook me to my core.

Oh, no.

Oh, no no no.

I covered my mouth with the back of my hand holding the dagger, my stomach dropping to below my feet. Ice-cold frost that *burned* crept inward from the tips of my fingers and toes until it reached

my heart and seared me in a wave of white-hot shame.

The amrit.

My babbling.

Lucifer's cruel smirk.

His taunting remarks.

The *laughter*.

And all the while, Azazel stood there in front of Lucifer's court, in front of the very same demons who'd mocked him when he was a child, and he had to listen to me spill the secret of our marriage... which gave them all new ammunition to ridicule him.

Of course, it wasn't technically my fault that I revealed the marriage deal, what with the amrit wreaking havoc on me. I *knew* that.

And yet.

My entire body flushing hot, my throat tight, I couldn't help imagining how he must have felt in that moment, when my amrit-induced blabbing ripped his old wounds right the fuck open.

I hadn't seen his face during the ordeal, didn't know what he looked like while he had to endure—once more—Lucifer's derision and the jeering of the court. But I remembered, with crystal clarity, what he'd been like right after. Curt, snappy, *furious*.

With me?

I bit my lip, my eyes burning.

Breath stinging in my lungs, I turned. I couldn't think about this now. Getting out of here was the more pressing issue at the moment. I'd deal with everything else when I found my way to safety.

Feeling my way along the wall, I walked until I hit the dead end. Once again, I used the blood from my open wounds to draw the sigil in the pitch-black. This time, I closed my eyes before the flash of light blinded me.

Warm air whispered over my face, bringing with it the scents of cinnamon and orange. I plastered myself to the wall inside the corridor and squinted into the light spilling in from the room beyond the new doorway, my dagger at the ready.

A big private chamber, colorful drapes hanging from the walls and ceiling, creating the impression of being inside a tent. Plush rugs covered the ground, their swirling patterns of green and blue like the play of light on the ocean floor. An open doorway gaped in the opposite wall, half concealed with curtains, another room visible beyond. I could just make out more rugs and what looked like an easel and art supplies.

Cautiously, I stepped into the room, my pulse pounding in my head. Movement drew my gaze to the corner to the right, where more curtains hid what appeared to be a bed. A soft whoosh indicated the magical doorway closing behind me.

Crap. If whatever was in here posed a threat, I wouldn't be able to just run back into the corridor.

I readjusted my grip on the dagger and snuck over the rugs as carefully as my injured ankle allowed. Maybe I could make it past the bed without drawing attention.

I was almost to the doorway leading into the next room when warm breath brushed my neck. I froze, fear blanking my mind, and I lost valuable seconds to my burgeoning panic. When I whirled around, dagger raised, a hand grabbed my wrist and held it effortlessly immobile.

Inches from me stood a female demon, my arm in her grip, her power a cascade of energy over my skin. Auburn hair framed a face of the lightest brown, her features familiar, her eyes...her eyes the color of the ocean rushing onto white sandy shores.

"You smell like him," she said in a husky voice. "My boy."

My eyes widened. “Who?” I asked with a squeak, even though the answer to my question already crept up on me on icy feet.

She drew in a deep breath, a smile lighting her face. “Azazel.”

All breath left me in a rush.

My voice a whisper, I spoke the name that rose in recognition, “Naamah.”

CHAPTER 20

AZAZEL'S MOTHER REGARDED ME WITH OPEN CURIOSITY, IMPOSSIBLY ALIVE.

Stunned speechless, I could only stare back.

They'd lied to him. They told him she died, and for two thousand five hundred fucking years, Lucifer and Daevi and who knew how many others kept Naamah's continued existence a secret, let Azazel and Azmodea believe their mother was gone.

Why?

The sheer, naked cruelty of it chilled my soul.

"Who are you?" she asked, stroking my cheek with her free hand, the other still holding my wrist. "You taste fragile."

"Zoe," I breathed. "I—I'm bonded to Azazel."

I didn't know if she'd understand if I explained about the marriage thing, but surely putting it in terms of a bond like Lucifer and Lilith had would make sense to her.

"Yes," she murmured, her eyes mapping my face. "You carry his scent in your skin."

She abruptly let me go and turned away, humming under her breath. Letting her fingers glide over the drapes on the wall, she strolled into the next room, the loose gown she wore billowing around her hips.

Baffled, I followed her. She was standing at the easel, mixing paint on a palette. The canvas held a work-in-progress, a painting of bold strokes and vibrant colors reminiscent of expressionism. Humming, she added more color, her back turned to me.

I watched her for a few minutes, waiting for her to acknowledge me again. When she remained focused on her work, I ventured softly, "Excuse me?"

She stilled, slowly pivoted on her heels and pinned me with a look. "Who are you?"

I exhaled a shaky breath, my heart breaking in understanding.

"Zoe," I said, my voice hoarse from how my throat was closing up. "I'm bonded to your son."

Her lips parted, and she dropped the paintbrush. "Azazel? How is he?"

Tears prickled at the back of my eyes. "He's great. Strong, confident, stubborn." My voice broke. "He's the bravest male I know."

Her throat muscles worked as she swallowed, her gaze swinging to the side. "Does he remember me?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Her eyes held a sheen as she looked up again. "Not just the bad?"

I shook my head, inhaled a breath that hurt all the way in and out. "Have you been here all this time?"

“How long?”

Oh, God.

“Two thousand five hundred years,” I said in a small voice.

She closed her eyes, opened them again. Her face contorted, her energy flaring hot. “They think I broke because of *him*,” she said harshly. “Because of how he left. As if a male could shatter me.” Lips quivering, agony etched into her features, she added in an anguished tone, “It was me. It’s always been me. Something’s not right in me.”

My vision blurred, tears filling my eyes. I furiously blinked them away.

Naamah rubbed her temples, pressed the heels of her hands against her head. “I can’t get it out. *I can’t make it right.*”

The pain in my chest felt like shards of glass digging into my heart. I wanted to help her so badly, hug her until she was okay. But all the hugs in the world wouldn’t be enough to make her okay.

She uttered a tormented sound that tore at my soul, then sank down on the floor. Eyes vacant, she brushed her fingers over the rug, back and forth, back and forth.

“Naamah?” I asked softly.

No reaction. She continued stroking the rug, her gaze unfocused.

At a loss for what else to do, I knelt down next to her, tentatively touched her arm with my left hand. I sucked in a sharp breath when the flare of pain at the contact reminded me that my fingers were a bloody mess.

Without looking at me or my hand, Naamah tilted her head and laid her hand over my fingers. “Broken,” she muttered.

Warm tingles spread through my hand, up my arm and through the rest of my body. The pain vanished, not just the one in my hand, but the throbbing in my ankle and the dull hurt inside my skull as well.

“Thank you,” I whispered, wishing so hard I could return the favor.

Naamah hummed, her eyes unseeing, lost in her own world.

A commotion outside the room made me snap up my head, look to the closed door leading out of these chambers. Sounds of metal clanging came from the other side. Fighting?

I had a brief moment of wide-eyed confusion, and then the door burst in as if blasted by an explosion.

A demon barreled inside. For a hopeful second, I thought it was Azazel.

But no, this was someone else. Someone with wild eyes, blood all over him, and a raised dagger. “I found her!” he yelled.

And then he threw the blade.

I didn’t even have time to startle. The knife embedded itself in flesh with a nauseating thunk. Next to me, Naamah toppled over backwards, the dagger protruding from her chest, rendering her unconscious.

No!

The demon was already striding toward us, giving me a cursory glance. My hand curled around the hilt of my dagger, hidden from his view next to my thigh.

Having reached us, he grabbed my hair and pulled me up. Pain shot from my scalp all the way through my body, and I screamed, pawing at his grip with my free hand. The flash of a blade, cold steel against my throat.

The demon peered at me. “You’re Azazel’s, hm?” He clucked his tongue. “Didn’t expect you here, but you’ll be a nice bonus.”

Focus, Zoe. I breathed, stilled the shaking of my hand. Muscle memory took over. Weeks of training, repeating the same movement over and over, guided my stroke. With an exhale, I yanked the dagger up and shoved it forward, straight into the demon's chest.

His eyes widened, his features going slack. His grip on my hair spasmed, eased. I fell to the floor at the same time he dropped his blade. A second of frozen shock, then I rolled over and stumbled to my feet.

The demon lay on his back, eyes staring at the ceiling, mouth agape. The dagger sat in his chest, bull's eye in his heart—incapacitating him for now, just like Azazel had taught me.

I let out a rugged breath. My hands were shaking, my heartbeat a jackhammer in my chest. What now?

More sounds of fighting from the hallway. Shit, shit, shit. He'd yelled to someone earlier. He had backup.

My gaze fell on Naamah, still lying there with the dagger in her chest. I rushed to her, grabbed the handle, and yanked the blade out. That should speed up the healing, shouldn't it? And when she woke, she'd be able to fight, right? *Right?*

Just then another demon ran into the room, sword raised. All the blood drained from my head, making me dizzy. *Too soon.* Naamah was still out. I hadn't even raised the dagger yet when the demon stood over me, the tip of his sword under my chin.

No way could I repeat my earlier move now, not with me on my knees and him standing. I swallowed.

A rush of air was the only warning. The demon jerked, his chest bowed outward, and then the bloody tip of a sword emerged from inside him. Muscles loosening, he fell to his knees, then slumped to the side, the sword still embedded, the handle sticking out his back.

Behind him stood a dark-haired female demon in the black-and-gold livery of Lucifer's guards, blood-streaked and half-shredded, a second sword in her hand. Her eyes took in the scene.

A demon with a dagger in his chest. Naamah on her back, the front of her dress bloodstained. Me, on my knees over her, a blade clutched in my hands.

My eyes widened. I dropped the dagger and pulled my hands up in the universal pose of surrender. "It wasn't me!"

The guard's brown eyes narrowed.

"Okay," I said frantically, "I did *him*. But not her!" I jerked my head toward Naamah. "We were just talking. Then this guy ran in and knifed her. He came for me too, and I stuck him with my dagger. That's all, I swear!"

"How did you get in here?"

"I was lost and there were these rats and I had to run, but there was no other way, so I used a sigil, it's the only sigil I know, from Azazel, I had no idea where it would lead me, but then it opened up here and—"

"Stop," the guard barked. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she added in a murmur, "Hell's bells."

Apparently dismissing me for the moment, she stalked past me to the first demon—still down for the count—hailed him up by the throat, and slashed off his legs with two horribly efficient strokes of her sword.

I winced and crawled backward.

The guard proceeded to chop off the demon's arms at the shoulder as well, then dropped him unceremoniously. All through the butchery, the demon hadn't moved, still unconscious. Swinging the sword in her hand, the guard strode to the second demon—also still knocked out—and yanked him up

by the throat too.

I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to keep the bile from rising up. Averting my eyes didn't help much. The sounds of her cutting off the limbs of the demon painted a vivid enough picture in my mind, given I'd just witnessed what it looked like.

Naamah stirred. Gasping, she rolled over and into a crouch. Her eyes roved over the bloodbath in the room, flicked from me to the guard.

"My lady," the guard said with a bow. "Please excuse the mess. Someone will come by shortly to clean up. I suggest you retreat to your bedroom."

Naamah frowned at the floor. "That was my favorite rug."

"I apologize, my lady. It couldn't be helped. I'll be sure to ask His Grace to replace it."

"Don't bother." With a disdainful sniff, Naamah rose and strode into the adjacent room.

The guard loosed a sigh and went to lug both demons out into the hallway just as another guard came running. They conversed in hushed whispers for a moment. When the female guard returned, she pointed her sword at me.

"You. Come with me."

Oh, boy.



THE GUARD EASILY HAULED THE TWO DISMEMBERED DEMONS ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE PALACE AND into the throne room by the cuffs of their shirts, intermittently barking at me to keep up. At some point the delinquents woke and began screaming, which the guard solved by re-stabbing them each to render them unconscious again.

I might have had a girl crush on her.

The throne room bustled with activity, though different from the exuberant and erotic revelry from earlier. The crowd was gone, instead hordes of lower-level demons like the merihem were scrubbing floors, pillars, and walls, and I blinked in bafflement at the few who were currently...hand-vacuuming tapestries, trying hard to remove the pink glitter that stuck to everything like some hellish fairy dust.

Oh. So that hadn't been an amrit-induced hallucination after all. Azmodea really did set off *glitter* bombs. I bit back laughter. How fiendish.

My amusement vanished like a popped bubble when the dais came into view. Lucifer and a handful of his courtiers as well as Lilith were present. Anxiety rocked through me, making my skin crawl. The memories of how he forced me to drink the amrit and took advantage of my drugged state played out vividly in my mind. My skin flushed hot. He'd humiliated me in front of his court with such easy cruelty, and my visceral reaction at seeing him again was to turn and run.

Especially since he was in the process of punishing someone.

A demon knelt before him, straining as if trying to move against shackles, though I saw none. Lucifer laid a hand on his head and spoke a word I couldn't make out from where I stood. The demon screamed, and his wings erupted from his back.

"Please don't," the demon pleaded.

Placing one hand on the demon's left shoulder, Lucifer grasped his right wing—and yanked. Flesh and muscles ripped, bones broke, as the wing tore away from the demon's back. More ear-splitting screams, blood spraying in a gruesome rain.

Humming, Lucifer handed the ripped-off, blood-dripping wing to an attendant next to him. Cracking his knuckles, he went for the other wing.

I gagged, the bile I'd tried so hard to keep down after the guard dismembered the demons finally forcing its way up my throat. Bending over, I retched and puked the sparse contents of my stomach onto the floor.

A merihem scurried over and mopped the vomit right up, ranting and raving at me all the while in their impish language.

I winced, my stomach aching, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

The guard threw the two demons on the floor in front of the dais and went down on her knee, bowing her head. "Your Grace."

I remembered protocol with a start and quickly knelt as well, lest I give Lucifer more reason to punish me. I was probably in boiling hot water with him already anyway.

"Timira," Lucifer said. "Rise. What have you got for me?"

"Two insurgents who broke into Naamah's rooms and attacked her, sire."

The entire hall hushed, even the whimpers of the punished demon died down.

"What?" Lucifer's whispered question held all the more menace for how quiet it was.

Timira gulped audibly. "It seems two of the insurrectionists made it past the guards stationed outside her quarters. I arrived on the scene after hearing the commotion from several corridors over, while dispatching another insurgent. The two guards outside her room were incapacitated, the door smashed in. Inside, I found these two demons, one of them immobilized by a dagger through the heart, the other with his sword at *her* throat."

She gestured to me, and I ducked and furtively glanced around, searching for a hole to crawl to and hide in.

Timira went on with a succinct report of the scene and my own statement, after which eerie silence again descended over the throne room. I chanced a look at the dais and immediately wished I hadn't.

Cold fury vibrated around Lucifer, ice crystals forming in the air, frost licking over the floor, down the steps, until it reached my bare knees. I shivered. I knew what happened when Lucifer got *furious* as opposed to "just" angry.

"You," he said, his voice chilling me to my bones.

An invisible hand grabbed me by the throat and pulled me up until my toes barely touched the ground. I gagged, pawed at my neck, unable to break the hold of a hand that wasn't there. Little lights danced across my vision, darkness creeping in. I wheezed, struggled for breath, panic setting in.

"I should squash you like the bug you are."

My mind was a white wasteland of fear.

"Lu." A resonant female voice. "She saved your daughter's life. You owe her a debt."

The grip around my throat eased. My feet fully touched the ground, and I gasped for air.

On the dais, Lucifer turned to Lilith, his expression equal parts bewilderment and reproach.

"Lil," he grated.

She cast him the best side-eye I'd ever seen. "I like this one," she said.

"Why?" Lucifer looked like he'd sucked on two pounds of lemons.

Lilith's eyes tracked to me. "She reminds me."

"Of what?"

A small smile curved her lips. "What it was like to be human."

Lucifer glared at Lilith for a long moment before he turned to me with the utter resignation of a

man fulfilling his beloved's whimsical bidding. If the circumstances were different, it'd have made him quite likable.

Noise from somewhere behind me drew Lucifer's gaze. His eyes narrowed, and I dared a glance over my shoulder to see what was going on. My heart stopped, then launched into a wild gallop.

Azazel strode into the hall, flanked by two guards. He spotted me. His eyes widened. A tremor visibly went through him, and for a second, the beacon of his energy inside me pinged with a white-hot emotion.

Zoe, he said in my mind, *are you*—

His voice cut off like a disconnected phone call. The beacon of his energy faded away, as if muted.

"Ah, Azazel," Lucifer drawled. "How fortunate of you to join us. It seems like you lost something." He indicated me. "Or maybe that was deliberate? In the hopes an accident may befall her, to be rid of your unwanted wife?"

I jerked as if slapped. Lucifer's words pierced something soft and raw inside me, scraped over old, festering wounds like claws, tore them wide open. I sucked in a sharp breath.

No. That wasn't right. Azazel wouldn't do that. Lucifer was just trying to needle me—however he knew exactly how to do that, I had no idea, but he was the devil for a reason.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. All the things Azazel had done for me, the way he treated me, it had to count for something. He walked back into his own trauma for me, for fuck's sake. You didn't do that for someone you wanted to get rid of.

And yet, I couldn't shake that small, insistent voice in my head whispering that this was *before* I'd unwittingly humiliated him in front of Lucifer's entire court and gave them the ammunition to mock him for at least the next century. Azazel had been so hurt after, so withdrawn, the cold edge with which he talked to me chillingly fresh in my mind.

What if my blunder, however much it wasn't my fault, broke the fragile thing that had grown between us? What if it soured his feelings for me...such as he might have had? He'd never told me if he did. We hadn't talked about what we felt for each other.

And now...now I feared the tender thread between us frayed, threatening to snap. Resentment wasn't rational, defied best intentions, and found cracks to slip inside and wedge wide open over time.

While I wrangled with my sobering thoughts, Lucifer spoke once more. "It seems I owe dear Zoe here a debt. I'd hate to have it hanging over my head, so allow me to settle it. I have just the thing, perfect actually—" he pointed at me and Azazel with a smile that was edged with a razor "—for both of you. It will make all parties happy."

Inwardly, I cringed. Knowing Lucifer, whatever he was about to propose would be a double-edged sword. I pressed my lips together, bracing myself.

"My offer, darling Zoe," he purred, giving me his undivided attention, "is to annul your marriage to Azazel and send you back home."

If a freight train had barreled into me, I couldn't have been more shocked or keeled over. *Home.*

"You'll be back in your old life," Lucifer continued, "with your friends, your job...your family. It will be as if none of this ever happened. No one will remember that you disappeared. People will think you took a long vacation volunteering on a llama farm in Peru, or whatever you kids do these days. And you won't remember any of this." He leisurely waved a hand at the entirety of Hell. "No harm done, everything back to normal. A wish come true."

I sucked in a sharp breath. Didn't I wish for that? A way out of this nightmare, to go back to my

ordinary, perfectly boring life, in a world that was familiar and safe...ish? Compared to Hell, at least. And to see my mom again...talk to her, touch her. My heart ached, and I rubbed over my breastbone.

But was it still? A nightmare, that is. However this started, hadn't it become something else since then?

Before I could answer that question, Lucifer turned to Azazel, a glint in his eye. "Wouldn't that be a gift for you as well? To be able to divest yourself of this unbidden burden, to rid yourself of this problem. Isn't that what you've wanted?"

My breath got stuck in my throat. Every aching part of me hovered on the precipice of a great fall, painfully tense.

His gaze steady on Lucifer, Azazel said, "Yes."

I never knew a single word could shatter my heart.

I gasped, my shoulders slumping. A thousand shards cut me on the inside, opened those barely scabbed-over wounds Lucifer just poked at earlier, and I bled, bled, bled. Whatever little belief I'd had in Azazel's intentions crumbled to dust, along with any fledgling hope for something more.

I struggled to breathe. Pain flared in my chest, rapacious and furious. He couldn't have hurt me more if he'd taken one of those daggers and thrust it straight through my heart.

I mentally grasped for my walls. Where were they when I needed them, when I'd rather close myself off than break apart in public? They'd served me so well in all the years past, but I'd taken them down for Azazel, and now I couldn't seem to raise them again.

Azazel's voice snapped my attention back to him. "But," he said, still looking at Lucifer, "it's not what I want anymore."

Lucifer pressed his lips into a thin line, and his expression darkened.

Azazel caught my gaze, a storm of lightning in his eyes. "I want you to stay. You're mine, and I'm claiming you." He took a heavy breath, his voice harsh as he added, "You're not a burden, not a problem to be rid of. You're the reason I've smiled more in the past few weeks than I did in the last decades. Getting to know you is the best thing to have happened to me in a long while. I want you down here with me, as my wife." A pause, then, softly— "If you'll have me."

Instant, crushing relief rushed through me with enough force to make me sway on my feet. I raised a trembling hand to my mouth, my eyes prickling hot. It should have scared me, how much his words meant to me, how fiercely I felt that breathtaking sense of relief and utter joy. And maybe it did, a little.

My walls, I guessed, had kept me from this, from feeling this deeply, from handing someone the power to hurt me. Because when you showed someone the vulnerable parts of yourself, you gave them the knowledge where exactly to cut to make you bleed.

As Azazel had given me. He told me of his scars, let me see the parts of him that were raw and hurting, gave me the knowledge to eviscerate him.

And it was because of this, as I stood there staring at him, that I knew what his declaration cost him, knew how much he risked. Not Lucifer's scorn, not the mockery of the court, no.

My rejection.

He laid his heart at my feet, told me he wanted me to stay, when I was just as likely to go back to Earth as I was to remain here. Azazel couldn't know how I felt. How would he, when I'd just figured it out myself?

He'd just sliced himself open and handed me that most vulnerable part of him, the piece that was battered and bruised by his father's abandonment—who didn't love him enough to stay in his life.

And I could hurt him just as badly now, if I chose to accept Lucifer's offer and went back to Earth, with my mind wiped of every memory of Azazel. Gone all the moments we shared, the joy, the pain, the laughter, the sex...the love.

Heart aching from the choice laid out before me, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, it was to see Azazel waiting patiently for my answer.

And I found it wasn't really a choice at all. My heart had known all along.

"Yes," I whispered. "I'll stay."

His smile was sudden and blindingly bright, his eyes holding the hint of welcome surprise. He really hadn't known. He'd been prepared to receive a crushing rejection and watch me walk out of his life.

Never, I vowed silently. Never would I give him up. He was mine, and I'd claim him as he did me.

I turned to Lucifer, who'd watched our exchange with a sour expression. His lip even curled.

"Your Grace," I said. "As much as I appreciate your generous offer, I have to decline. I'd rather stay in Hell."

He bared his teeth. "I will not have this debt hanging over my head. It needs to be settled now."

I blinked. "That sounds like a you problem."

"Zoe," Azazel hissed.

I startled, clapped a hand over my mouth, and hastily bowed. "My apologies, Your Grace. What I meant to say was—I mean—"

Think, think, I urged myself. *Propose something else.*

"I want powers," I blurted.

"Powers." Lucifer regarded me like one might a yipping chihuahua. "What kind?"

The gears in my head turned in overdrive. *What kind, what kind...* Flying was out of the question.

Or was it?

I squinted at Lucifer. "Wings?"

He rolled his eyes. "How utterly predictable." Crossing his arms, he added, "No. I can't turn you into a demon, and I can't give you wings."

Well, it was worth a try.

"Healing," I said after thinking on it for a few more seconds. "I want to heal as fast as a demon."

"Obviously," Lucifer muttered.

"And summoning!" I added with a raised finger, having thought of this one just now.

He sighed and casually waved his hand. "Done."

A tingle ran through my body, and I inhaled sharply. Was that it? So easy? I raised a brow and scratched my arm hard enough to draw blood—just to watch the fresh wound begin to close almost immediately.

"Do you doubt my word?" Lucifer asked with quiet menace.

I jerked my head up. "No! Of course not, Your Grace. I would never, I swear. I was just—I mean—there was an itch—all that glitter—"

Azazel's hand closing over my mouth effectively cut off my babbling as he pulled me to him with his other arm around my waist. "She meant to say *thank you*, Your Grace. The debt is paid, and we'll be going now. If you'll excuse us."

And with that he lifted me and whirled around, already striding toward the doors to the lobby.

"Wait!" I yelled, reaching back to the dais. "My dagger!"

I'd be loath to leave that beautiful stabby thing here, lodged as it still was in the chest of the

demon I'd stuck with it. The insurgent in question had woken in the meantime, along with his comrade, though they'd been smart enough not to scream in Lucifer's presence.

Azazel growled and turned back around, just as Lucifer strolled down the dais, grabbed the dagger and yanked it out of the demon. The guy didn't even wince. Then again, the move probably barely registered over the pain he must be in from his severed limbs.

"This one here?" Lucifer asked, weighing the blade.

"Yes," I squeaked weakly.

"Hmm."

With a move too fast for my eyes to follow, he threw the dagger right at me. It thudded into my shoulder with enough force to thrust me back against Azazel's chest. Pain exploded in my upper body, and I screamed.

"To test your new healing skills," Lucifer purred.

Azazel snarled, his energy vibrating so violently, it crawled over my skin and let the air shimmer around us. His wings unfurled with an aggressive *whoosh*.

"Careful, boy." Lucifer clucked his tongue. "I'm in the mood for blood. You should take your leave as long as you can."

Azazel glowered at him, but I tapped him on his arm around my waist.

"Let's just go," I whispered as I pulled the dagger out of my shoulder, cringing at the fresh pain.

With a rough exhale, Azazel tucked his wings back in. Hefting me up in his arms, he pivoted and marched toward the doors.

A push and pop in my head, but instead of Azazel, it was Lucifer who spoke directly into my mind. *Oh, and Zoe?*

The intensity of his energetic presence made me tremble.

Not a word about Naamah, he went on. *To anyone. Including your brooding husband.*

My lips parted. That was—no. Azazel needed to know. I couldn't do that to him.

If you want to leave here, Lucifer said, his mental voice a threat wrapped in silk, *I'll need your binding vow not to reveal what you know about Naamah.*

Your Grace, I stammered. *Please.*

Vow it.

I looked up at Azazel's achingly beautiful face, his features drawn tight as he carried me, and I closed my eyes.

I vow not to reveal what I know about Naamah.

Good, Lucifer crooned. *This is your friendly reminder that vows are binding, and breaking them has consequences.* A heavy pause. *You do not want to find out what they are.*

Understood, I whispered.

See you around, kid. His voice dripped with wry amusement.

The next instant, his mental presence receded, leaving me alone with a terrible secret and a heaping amount of guilt. But what choice did I have?

I wrapped my arms around Azazel's neck, careful to keep the dagger away from him, and buried my nose in the curve of his neck. Clutching me tighter, he hurried on.

I shared in his urgency—I didn't want to spend one minute longer than necessary in this palace. I still couldn't believe we were getting out of here at all.

We were just crossing the lobby, when a shout made Azazel pause.

"There you are!" Azmodea called, descending one of the staircases. "I've been looking for you all over. Are you okay?"

She shook off what looked like a tiny reptile that had sunk its teeth into her right calf, and picked something out of her hair that fluttered away on leathery wings, before she joined us on the floor of the lobby.

“I’m fine,” I said. “We’re leaving.”

“Oh, thank Hell. This place is the *worst*.” She patted my cheek. “So glad you’re in one piece, darling.”

Falling into step with us, she gave me a once-over, her eyes lingering on the bloody dagger in my grip. “So, what’d I miss?”

“Later,” Azazel said.

I released a rough exhale and laid my head on his shoulder, glad for the delay.

Because I had no idea how to explain what happened without mentioning Naamah.



WE DIDN’T SPEAK AGAIN UNTIL WE ENTERED DAEVI’S TERRITORY. THE MOMENT WE FLEW OVER THE border—marked by patrols and a line of fire on the ground—Azazel’s shoulder muscles lost some of their tension under my hands.

Azmodea took her leave soon after, promising to come over later to compare notes—after a thorough shower, as she said, to wash off any vermin residue and persistent glitter.

We flew on, the harsh landscape of Hell zooming by underneath us.

Can you hear me? Azazel’s voice in my head.

Yes! What happened earlier—it felt like you were cut off.

Lucifer. Azazel’s mental voice held a growl. *He blocked me.*

Such a cock-block.

Azazel barked a laugh, and warmth bloomed in my chest.

I love hearing you laugh, I whispered.

You’re the reason I do.

I smiled into his neck, the happy warmth spreading to every part of me.

Did you get him? I asked after a moment. *My dad?*

I hadn’t had a chance to check in with Azazel earlier, to see if he’d made it. I’d been out of commission during most of the mission, thanks to the forced nap time after I drank the amrit.

Yes.

My next exhale was perilously close to a sob, relief making me tremble in his arms.

Thank you. I kissed his neck. *Thank you.* His jaw. *Thank you.* The corner of his mouth.

You can thank your way down my body later if you’d like.

Don’t worry. I grinned. *I’ve got lots of gratitude left over.*

Hmm. The corner of his mouth kicked up.

I raised my hand and traced the curve of his lips, my heart painfully open. He caught my finger and nipped at the tip.

I’m sorry, I said. *About earlier.*

He frowned. *What?*

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. *When Lucifer made me drink the amrit. The things I said—*

That wasn’t your fault, he cut me off harshly.

I know. I curled my hand in his shirt. *But still... I'm so—*

He snapped his wings tight to his body, making us plummet at neck-breaking speed. The scream that wrenched its way out of my throat could have woken the dead.

There we go, he murmured in my mind.

“Stop it! *Azazel!*”

Of course, he did nothing of the sort. Instead, he rolled us in the air so we torpedoed like a damn bullet. I screamed and screamed and screamed.

Azazel laughed, the fiend.

“Stoooooop,” I yelled, and then, when he ignored me like the brute he was, I added, “How unbecoming of an *angel!*”

“That’s it,” he said. “I’ll drop you.”

“Don’t you dare!” I clutched him tighter than a Black Friday shopper at Costco did the last iPhone on sale.

He pinwheeled across the sky, alternated between powerful, ascending wing beats and sudden, stomach-dropping free falls, until my screaming turned to whooping laughter, and he kissed me breathless.

I only noticed we were close to home when he landed on the balcony outside his suite. Not even pausing to set me down, he shifted my weight and unlocked the door with the sigils, then briskly walked inside.

The door had barely fallen shut when he had me pinned against the wall, his kiss a bruising thing of passion. Arousal flared in my core, rolled outward in lush waves of lust as I slung my legs around his hips.

He broke the kiss, breath heavy, and laid his forehead against mine. “You’re here,” he rasped. “You stayed.”

For me. He didn’t add that last part, but I heard it clearly, understood how much it meant to him.

“You’re mine.” I stroked his cheek, tunneled my hand through his hair. “I’ll never give you up. You’re stuck with me now. I’ll cling to you like that glitter.” I nodded at the pink dust covering him.

His husky laugh did all sorts of sinful things to me. “I’ll be finding glitter on me fifty years from now.”

“Try a century.”

His eyes full of lightning, he murmured, “How about forever?”

“Are we still talking about glitter?” I bit my lip.

A sensual smile snuck onto his face, his energy a caress over my skin. “No.”

“In that case,” I said, booping him on the nose, “I want a ring.”

“A ring.”

“Don’t make me quote Beyoncé!”

He grinned as he kissed me. *A ring it is,* he spoke into my mind.

And then his kiss turned into a firestorm of urgency.

Licking and nibbling, he took my mouth with the kind of desperate hunger of someone who’d tasted the threat of starvation. I shivered, arched into him, and held on tight as I let him devour me. I was just as hungry for him.

He could have lost me today, and his kiss was testament of how much that had rocked him. A thousand words were packed into that kiss, the ones he’d spoken to me as he asked me to stay, and so many more that were yet to be said.

Tasting them on his tongue was enough for me right now.

I met him lick for lick, nip for nip, my blood afire. His hand on my hip made me suck in a sharp breath. With clear intent, he pulled the material of my dress out from between us.

I broke the kiss to protest. "I'm a bloody mess!"

He tilted his head. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Then I don't bloody care." Holding me in place with one hand under my ass, he slipped his other hand between my legs and found me wet and swollen.

"Azazel!" I gasped. "Your bathroom is *right there*. We should take a shower first—"

"I need you," he said, his gentle strokes over my intimate flesh in stark contrast to the harshness of his tone. "I watched you be pulled into a hole by a filthy hellrat and spent the next hour thinking you'd died."

I exhaled roughly, my chest squeezing at the pain in his words.

"I need to feel you," he continued, his finger circling my clit. "I need to catch your breaths with my mouth, hear you cry my name when I make you come. I need to feel you hot and wet and ready when I take you so hard that I'll be stamped into every cell of your body."

My toes curled, and I arched into his touch.

"And, no," he said with a growl, "this can't wait. Not even five minutes."

"Okay," I wheezed, my pulse thundering, his caresses a firebrand on my skin. "Okay."

I surrendered to the heady sensation of his fingers parting my lips, grazing my entrance. A moan tore itself from my throat as he slid two fingers inside me while pressing his thumb to my clit.

He was right. This couldn't wait, and I needed this as much as he did. I didn't want to imagine my life without him in it, without his touch, his laughter, his love. The thought alone hurt as much as a physical blow, and I clung tighter to him, pushed into his caress and caught his lips with mine, needing to drown out pain with pleasure.

He pumped his fingers in and out, stroking over my clit, until I rolled my hips with frantic need.

His mouth at my ear, hot breaths on my skin. "Come for me."

I tipped over the edge with a drawn-out moan, losing myself in the explosions of bliss, the feel of his lips on my neck. The waves of my orgasm were yet crashing over my senses when the blunt head of his cock pushed inside me.

He stretched me with a delicious edge of pain, the movement as he sank home stoking the fires that had barely begun to simmer down. His throaty moan did me in completely. I came again, my head falling back against the wall, my hands buried in his hair.

"You feel perfect," he groaned.

I clenched around him, sought his mouth, and found him eagerly meeting my lips. His kiss was demanding, possessive, greedy, and I gave him my breath, my heart, my all. Whatever he desired, it was his for the taking.

And take me he did.

Slinging one arm behind my back to cushion me against the wall, he grabbed on to my thigh with the other hand—and fucked me. *Hard*.

All I could do was hold on to him with my hands around his neck as he slammed into me again and again, claiming me more with each powerful stroke. His energy pushed and pulled on my skin, and the exquisitely raw friction of his body meeting mine coiled the tension in me tighter and tighter.

I felt him everywhere, inside and out, his words proving true. He really stamped himself into every cell in my body, and I reveled in the sensation. I wanted him imprinted onto my very soul.

Clutching my thigh, he plunged into me faster, harder, until my teeth rattled with the force of his

thrusts. Not that I cared. Not when I needed his ferocity with a relentless greed of my own. I clenched my legs around his hips, dug my nails into his back, bit the curve of his neck. I'd never before held on to anything as desperately as I did to him.

His energy licked over my clit, and that was it.

Pleasure burst in my core, coruscant explosions of bliss that stole my breath.

"Azazel," I moaned, riding the cresting wave of my orgasm, riding him.

He clamped me tight with his one hand around my back and buried the other in my hair. Tugging my head back, he exposed my neck, placing a hot kiss on my racing pulse, while he continued pumping into me. One, two, three more thrusts, and he followed me over.

Hearing his husky moan as he found his release made me shiver with delight. I could become addicted to that sound, to the feeling of him inside me when he groaned like that, knowing I gave him this pleasure.

Well, to be honest, I could become addicted to *him*.

Chests heaving with our fast breathing, we shared the air between us, lingering in this moment of blissful intimacy.

My hand on his cheek, my heart on my sleeve. "I love you," I whispered.

Raw and open, I bared myself to him more than to anyone. I'd never said these words before, not to someone who wasn't family or my best friend. And yet now they seemed barely enough to express what I felt for him.

It was enough for him. His eyes flashed lightning, his energy a cascade of heat over my skin, his touch reverent as he traced my mouth with his thumb. "Tell me every day." His hand was warm where he cupped my cheek. "Tell me again and again, until I kiss the words from your lips."

With a smile, I murmured, "I love you."

His hand on my throat.

"I love you."

His fingers gliding over the swell of my breasts.

"I love you."

His thumb flicking my nipple.

"I love you."

His lips on my jaw.

"I love y—"

His mouth on mine, stealing the words.

I love you too, he spoke in my mind, and I melted into his kiss.

CHAPTER 21

“READY?” AZAZEL’S EYES MET MINE.

I blew out a heavy breath—or would have, if I hadn’t been in ghost form. Even though my body was incorporeal, I could have sworn sweat still slicked over my skin, my pulse fluttering.

We stood in the backyard of my father’s house in Gresham. The wind rustled the leaves in the tree above us, yet I didn’t feel the air in my spirit form. Sunshine glinted off the water drops from the most recent rain shower, and somewhere a block over kids were laughing and squealing. The world went on about its business, oblivious to the demon and the ghostly human in their midst.

We’d come here soon after our return from Lucifer’s palace, and now I clenched my hands at my sides, my emotional state somewhere between numb and uproariously agitated. This was it. We were about to release my father’s soul here on Earth.

I nodded at Azazel and braced myself. “Do it.”

He pressed a button on the small box in his hand, it sprang open...and with a bright flash of light, it spat out its content. A shape appeared on the ground—a man on all fours. Trembling, he let his head hang between hunched shoulders. When he looked up, his eyes were unfocused, but their color was a shock of familiarity. Hazel, a mirror image of my own.

Brown hair cut short, his face an aged version of the one I once knew so well, my father stared unseeing at his surroundings. My chest squeezed tight. I hadn’t seen him in so long, I’d almost forgotten the details of his features. Time had deepened the lines around his eyes, his mouth, had sharpened his cheekbones and jaw.

But he was still the man I’d looked up to as a child, the one who held my hand until I fell asleep when I was scared, who always slipped me extra candy when mom wasn’t looking.

Heart heavy with too much at once, I raised a shaking hand to my throat. He was here, truly here.

He blinked, squinted, and glanced around.

“Dad?” I ventured softly.

His eyes landed on me, and he jerked. His face contorted in agony. “No,” he said, his voice plaintive. “Please, not again.” He clutched his head in both hands and rocked on his knees. “Not her again. I can’t take it anymore. Please stop. Not her. I can’t take her pain. It hurts too much. Not again, not again, not again—”

“Dad...” My voice broke. “What—”

“Torture,” Azazel murmured from beside me. “They tortured him with you.”

I startled, turned to him. “*What?*”

“We punish not just physically.” He put his hands in his pants pockets. “Emotional torture often causes even more pain, especially when there’s guilt involved.”

“But—how—”

“He was likely shown scenes where you confronted him about his abandonment and either cried or yelled at him.” He cast me a sidelong glance. “Or both at once, since you’re an angry crier.”

“That is horrible,” I whispered.

My father was still rocking in a panic on the ground, and it broke my fucking heart to see him this way. There was a time when I would have thought I’d relish watching him feel the weight of what he did to me, knowing that he suffered from guilt over his actions.

The bleak reality was, it gave me no satisfaction at all.

Sick to my stomach, even in my spirit form, I sank to my knees in front of him and laid a hand on his shoulder, able to touch and feel him since we were both spirit.

“Dad. Stop. This isn’t a hallucination. I’m real. This is real.”

He stopped rocking.

“You’re not in Hell anymore.” I squeezed his shoulder, shaking inside and out. “It’s over.”

Haltingly, his eyes met mine. “Zoe?”

“Yes.” I felt the threat of tears in my eyes, knowing they wouldn’t fall. Not while I was here on Earth. “It’s really me. I’m not in your head. I’m not here to hurt you.”

His features slackened. “You’re really real?”

I nodded.

“Oh, my God.” He rubbed a hand over his face, then stilled. “Why don’t I feel my—” His gaze fell on Azazel, and he flinched as if whipped. “He’s one of them. He—he’s a—” He scrambled backward. “Zoe, get away from him!” Reaching out to me, he grabbed my arm and tried to pull me behind him.

My heart broke a bit more. “It’s okay,” I said soothingly, laying my hand over his. “He’s with me.”

My dad’s startled gaze swung to me. “What?”

“Um...” This was going to be awkward. “He’s my husband.”

A blank stare.

“We’re married.”

His mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“I think you broke him,” Azazel muttered from behind me. “Weeks of torture in Hell, but this is what did him in.”

“Shush,” I shot back over my shoulder. To my dad, I said, “This is Azazel, and he’s not like the others. He won’t hurt you. He’s the one who got you out for me.” I squeezed his hand. “He saved you.”

My dad’s eyes flicked to Azazel, but he still winced. I grimaced in sympathy. Yeah, it took some time to get used to his powerful presence.

“I don’t understand,” my dad rasped. “What happened? What’s going on?”

Oof, where to start?

While I was still pondering how to explain everything to my dad, Azazel said, “Call me if you need me,” and retreated to the front of the house, giving us some privacy.

I looked at my dad and bit my lip. “Well,” I said, “so I made this deal...”

And I told him. Starting with the séance, to the moment I’d found out about his soul in Hell, to our reckless rescue mission, to this instant right here, leaving out any details that were Not Safe for Parents.

My dad listened through it all, his eyes growing wider by the minute, and when I finished, he shook his head. “This is amazing.” His face full of wonder, he added softly, “You’re amazing.”

I ducked my head, foolish, childlike pleasure at his praise blooming warm inside me.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely. "You got me out, when you had every reason to watch me burn."

I shook my head, my voice hollow. "I don't want to watch you burn. It's not—" I broke off, pressed my lips together. "Seeing your pain doesn't lessen mine."

"Zoe," he began, then stopped, seeming to gather himself. "I said this a thousand times to you back in Hell, to that image of yours they kept sending me. You weren't real, but what I felt was." He paused, his features trembling. "I'm sorry."

I hadn't known how much those two words would make me feel.

"I'm sorry for the pain I caused you," he went on. "For how I left. It wasn't right, and I should have shown you that I still loved you." He grimaced. "It's no excuse, but back then I was...not in a good place. My life was upended—"

"By your own damn fault," I interjected quietly.

"Yes." He nodded, his expression resigned. "That's on me." A deep sigh. "I don't regret having a family with Olivia, because I love the girls. But I should have done it right."

I stared at him, my heart twisting. "Why didn't you? Why did you lie to us, *for years*?"

His shoulders slumped. He looked at the ground. "Because I was a selfish coward. When I fell in love with Olivia, I didn't stop loving your mom. It's not like turning off one switch and turning on another. I cared for your mother, deeply. And I didn't want to hurt her. I knew that if I told her...it would cause her so much pain. So I didn't."

I narrowed my eyes. "That's the worst load of bullshit I've ever heard."

He uttered a dry laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, it is."

"If you really loved her and didn't want to hurt her, you wouldn't have gone and done something you knew would hurt her in the first place. And you would have told her, if only just out of respect and to give her the choice what to do about the situation."

He nodded again. "I know that now. I know how reckless I was. How selfish." His eyes met mine. "Even before my time in H—down there, I'd come to realize my mistakes. Your mother is a good woman, and she didn't deserve how I treated her. She deserved a stronger man, and you deserved a father who was there for you. I wish I could take it all back, the lies, the hurt, the years of distance. But I can't. I can't make amends. This pain and regret are mine to carry, for the rest of my l—" He broke off, shook his head. "Well, I guess that'd be for all time, then."

He looked down at his hands in his lap. "I just want you to know that I'm sorry. Even if it doesn't change anything, even if it's too late. You deserve my apology, at the very least."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I might just start crying without being able to shed tears.

"I've heard you yell at me so many times," he said quietly. "But that was...*there*. It wasn't you, so if you want to, you know, rant and rail at me, go ahead. I'll take it. If you need to let it all out, I'm here now, and I'm listening. Your pain is valid. I deserve to feel it."

Pressing my lips together, I looked to the side, focused on the play of light and shadow underneath the tree. I'd had so many things to say to him, but they all seemed to have been sucked away now. What was left was simple, and yet so complicated.

"I don't think I can forgive you yet," I said, "and I don't know if I'll ever get there." I brought my gaze back to him. "But I still love you."

Simple, yet complicated.

"I understand." He nodded, his eyes full of emotion. "I've missed you, kiddo. And I'm so proud of the woman you've become."

My soul hurt in too many places at once. Quiet, my voice was so quiet. "I've missed you too."

"I wish...I wish I could have seen you live your life. See you happy and thriving."

I picked at a blade of grass, not feeling it in my fingers. "I could come visit."

He stared at me for a long time. "Would you?"

I was silent for a moment, thinking of the keening sense of loss I'd felt after I found out he'd died, the regret about time lost and opportunities forfeited. "Yeah," I said eventually, my eyes on the grass. "I think I'd like that."

"So what now?" he asked after a minute of companionable silence. "How do I go on? Do I?"

Right, there was that. Azazel and I had talked about it on the way here, and I told my dad what we'd agreed on.

"You can stay here, as a ghost," I said, "and you'll be good for a while. However, there will come a time when your spirit will...degenerate. You'll become something like a poltergeist, violent and aggressive. At which point you'll lash out at the living, and you'll hurt the very people you loved in life."

He drew back, dismay written into the lines of his face.

"I can't tell you when that will happen, but it usually takes some time. Decades. You have many good years ahead of you." I swallowed hard. "No other demon will be able to drag you back to Hell—Azazel will have someone here to watch over you. And if you should turn..."

"I'll be put down?"

I gave a shaky nod. Wraiths could never be rehabilitated, but they could be destroyed, their soul essence smashed to smithereens.

My dad looked toward the house. "Good," he said, his voice rough. After a minute, he turned back to me. "And you?"

"I'll be with Azazel."

His gaze mapped my face. "Will you be happy?"

A small smile stole onto my lips. "I already am."

"Then I'm happy for you." His answering smile was genuine but brittle, underlaid with pain and sadness.

Much like our relationship.

I stood, and he got to his feet as well.

"I'll be by," I said.

A self-deprecating smile. "I'll be here."

I hesitated for a moment, my heart in knots. Then I reached out and hugged him.

Startled, he didn't move at first. When his arms closed around me, I thought I felt him choke back a sob.

Throat tight, eyes pricking hot with the ghostly memory of tears, I let him go, nodded, and walked around the house to the front.

Azazel took one look at me and opened his arms. I walked right into his embrace, burying my face in his chest. His scent wrapped around me, strong and reassuring, his energy a comforting caress.

"He'll be okay," I murmured into his shirt.

"So will you."

Eventually. Or maybe not. Considering that Azazel held onto his loathing for his father for thousands of years...some wounds might never close.

And thinking of his father...guilt coiled in my guts for my lie of omission about his mother.

When Azazel asked me about what happened in Lucifer's palace and what I'd done to make Lucifer indebted to me, I stuck to the truth as much as possible. He'd seen my dagger lodged in the

chest of one of the insurgents, and I told him that by defending myself from the demon, I unwittingly saved one of Lucifer's treasures from being destroyed.

I was upfront about the vow Lucifer had extracted from me, that I was sworn to secrecy about the treasure itself.

Azazel wasn't happy about it, but he seemed to accept my explanation. He knew better than anyone that incurring Lucifer's wrath by breaking my vow to him would be a thing of madness.

Still, my secret ate at me, and I couldn't shake the feeling it would come back to haunt me in time.

My fingers dug into Azazel's shirt. I would cross that bridge when I got there.

Until then, I'd hold on to what I'd found, to this love that had sprung from the most unlikely of circumstances, and I'd relish every minute I spent with my own personal demon. He was a gift I hadn't seen coming, my love for him something I still marveled at in quiet moments.

Looking up at him, I slung my arms around his neck, pulled him down for a kiss. When we came up for air, his eyes were a storm of silver lightning.

"Let's go home," I whispered.

His smile promised sin and seduction. Grabbing me tighter, he unfurled his mighty wings and shot us into the sky, hellbound.



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After obtaining a university degree in the subjects job counselors like to warn you about ("There's no money in humanities!"), Nadine is now writing full-time and introvertedly thriving from her home office. You can usually lure her out of her socially awkward shell by striking up a conversation about languages (keywords: Indo-European family; relation of Sanskrit to Ancient Greek) and watch her geek out for the next hour.

She currently lives in California with her college sweetheart, beloved little demon spawn, and two black cats hellbent on cuddling her to death (Clarification: Both her husband and kid prefer her alive. The cats, she's not so sure about.)

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